Fuse Music Television:

Using Cultural Strategy to Challenge a Dominant Incumbent

Abridged chapter from Douglas Holt & Douglas Cameron, Cultural Strategy: Using Innovative Ideologies to Build Breakthrough Brands, Oxford University Press, 2010

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Entrepreneurs must often compete against a powerful incumbent that dominates the market and commands far superior resources. Better-mousetraps models urge entrepreneurs to avoid direct challenges to
incumbents. Such turf wars are supposedly red oceans, where start-ups are destined to be eviscerated by the big fish. Cultural strategy reveals that in many cases just the opposite is true. Sometimes, categories are rife with entrepreneurial opportunity precisely because a powerful incumbent dominates and at the same time has a cultural weakness to exploit. In such categories, taking on the incumbent directly is often the best approach. The challenger uses the popularity of the incumbent against itself, what we call cultural jujitsu. The more hefty the incumbent, the greater the leverage.

MTV is the goliath of music television. The network launched in 1981 and quickly established itself as the dominant arbiter of taste in American youth culture, promoting new musical acts, showcasing provocative music videos, mining new youth subcultures, and presenting youth-related news. It offered the hottest new youth cultural programming offerings, from animated slacker cartoons such as Beavis and Butthead to prankster comedies such as Jackass and The Tom Green Show. To corner the music television market, MTV Networks bought up competitors such as Country Music Television and the Black Entertainment Network, and it spun off niche networks such as VH2 and MTV2. By 2003, MTV Networks owned thirteen domestic cable networks, including MTV Hits, MTV Jams, MTV Tr3s, a Latin-oriented network, and mtvU, a college-oriented network. The unit’s $27 billion global business was the single largest asset in the media conglomerate Viacom’s portfolio of companies.

Rainbow Media launched MuchMusic in the USA in 1994 as a simulcast of a Canadian music television network with the same name. The tiny network
soon began to offer its own music video programming. Management conscientiously followed the principles of better-mousetraps innovation: it sought to carve out a blue ocean niche by championing “alternative” musical genres, such as indie, heavy metal, punk, and emo that MTV had largely abandoned because they were too small. Yet the concept never took off. Nine years later, in 2003, the network still had minuscule awareness amongst its youth target and virtually no important national advertisers. Nielson ratings remained low, hovering around a 0.3 percent share. Cable operators saw little reason to give the network prominent billing in their channel lineups and typically tucked it away in their systems’ triple digits.

In 2003, Rainbow Media hired us to help restage the network, which it had renamed Fuse, to compete more successfully against MTV. We were given the assignment with a tiny marketing budget that limited us to on-channel advertising and a small amount of guerrilla marketing. Nonetheless, using the cultural strategy model, we were able to turn around the network. We identified an ideological opportunity that took advantage of MTV’s Achilles heel. We developed a cultural strategy that led to numerous provocative challenges to MTV, setting up Fuse as the behemoth’s ideological counterpoint. In the first year of its relaunch, the network attracted unprecedented media attention, doubled its ratings, significantly grew its subscription base, and attracted dozens of new national advertisers.

**Cultural Research**
Rather than focus on identifying the category’s cultural orthodoxy and leapfrogging it, instead we focused exclusively on MTV’s cultural expressions with the goal of pinpointing an ideological Achilles heel that we could exploit. Because of MTV’s dominance, we knew that our best chance was to use cultural jujitsu tactics. So, we began our research with a brand genealogy of MTV.

Most youth music is, from an ideological viewpoint, an expression of youth rebellion, flaunting adult bourgeois norms. MTV originally operated as an adept clearing house for this kind of ideology, aggregating a diverse range of rebellious expressions. In the early 1980s, the network celebrated underground New Wave acts that had largely been ignored by the radio industry, introducing audiences to their provocative dayglo fashions, androgynous make-up, and audaciously sculpted haircuts. In the mid-1980s, the network presented Americans with Boy George’s provocative mix of camp and drag and Madonna’s then-shocking combination of sexuality and religious iconography. In the early 1990s, MTV recognized the potential of gangsta rap as a rebel myth for mainstream white youth, introducing them to the likes of Ice-T, Ice Cube, Dr Dre, and Snoop Dogg. The network titillated teenagers and shocked parents with these artists’ unprecedented celebration of gang violence, illicit drug use, police resistance, misogyny, and verbal profanity. Around this time, MTV also helped to popularize the defiant slacker subculture, through Beck’s lo-fi ‘Loser’ video and Mike Judge’s hyper-cynical Beavis and Butthead cartoon. The network had become expert in programming ever more provocative expressions of youth rebellion, serving up massive ratings while maintaining
credibility as an authentic youth cultural player. In this way, MTV became the single most powerful youth brand in America.

**MTV’s Ideological Achilles Heel: Celebrating the Teenybopper Dream of the Rich, Famous, and Beautiful Life**

In 1997, MTV President Judy McGrath launched an ambitious new strategy, shifting the network’s emphasis from music videos to longer-format programming. MTV executives had always known that music videos were poor vehicles to generate ratings because they encouraged channel surfing after each four-minute video ended, compared to longer-format programs that could lock in the viewer for thirty minutes or an hour. Yet, since music videos were the founding *raison d’être* of the network, no one had questioned their continued presence.

McGrath changed all that. Enter the era of teen soap operas, with their schlocky yet sticky content. The most successful of these, *Undressed*, followed the romantic relationships of young, good-looking, and often well-to-do Los Angeles teenagers. The network began to run and rerun episodes of *Undressed* with stunning frequency. Enter the era of reality programming. Whereas MTV once used reality shows such as *The Real World* as a novelty to round out the music video programming, McGrath’s strategy had reality programming dominating the network’s programming line-up. To replicate the ratings success of *The Real World*, MTV launched a slew of vapid reality shows such as *Sorority Life* and *Room Raiders* and celebrity gossip programs such as *The Mandy Moore Show*. Enter the era of pop princesses such as Britney Spears,
Jessica Simpson, and Paris Hilton, who now began to make appearances on MTV with greater and greater frequency and were trotted out with much fanfare at key network events such as the *MTV Video Music Awards*. Eventually, the network gave Simpson her own show, *The Newlyweds*, which showcased her life with Nick Lachey, chauffeured cars, starter mansions, and vacation villas. The show delighted in details that revealed the couple’s privilege, such as Simpson’s unfamiliarity with canned tuna and her inability to do laundry on her own.

Enter the era of celebrity glamour and fame worship. In 1998, *Total Request Live* was MTV’s prime outlet for airing music videos, but the network compromised its integrity by having celebrities show up as hosts. Instead of focusing on the musical or artistic details of the videos, *TRL* became a vehicle for promoting the upcoming movies of the celebrity co-hosts, pandering to the hundreds of screaming teenagers who showed up outside the studio to catch a glimpse of the rich and famous. Other shows were even more explicit about their celebrity glamour and fame worship. *MTV Cribs* gave viewers glimpses into celebrity mansions, and *Punk’d* featured model-turned-actor Ashton Kutcher playing pranks on other celebrities, intruding on them in their expensive homes or mock-arresting them in their luxury cars.

All of this added up to a radical remaking of MTV’s ideology, from an advocate of youth rebellion to a promoter of a teenybopper dream of the rich, famous, and beautiful lifestyle. MTV no longer idealized youth as rebels and provocateurs, but instead celebrated them as beautiful, rich, polished mini-
Romanticizing life on the margins was replaced by worshipping jet-setter celebrities doing glamorous things. MTV no longer gloried in oddball and often lo-fidelity production values, but instead presented itself as the polished, slick, orthodoxy of upscale fashion.

This radical shift made economic sense for MTV, the category’s dominant brand. The United States had entered a period of turbo-charged expansion of the upper class, spurring a society-wide infatuation with “making it,” becoming rich, and then “living large” on the proceeds. And the wealthy were becoming younger and younger if you believed news reports. The media had shifted from celebrating long-haired slackers who were pissed off at the world and formed underground bands to help vent their anger (Nirvana, for instance, in the early 1990s), to heroizing teenage tech entrepreneurs who made tens of millions before they were of legal drinking age.

By 2003, the bloom of the wealth-frenzied dot-com-driven late 1990s had shriveled up. In that go-go era of teenage millionaires, the lifestyle of rich, famous, and beautiful had seemed attainable for anyone. But, with jobs disappearing and incomes stagnating, a class divide was setting in. The United States had produced a huge upper class with over seven million millionaires. So if you were a teen growing up in a well-to-do household with parents who could afford to send you to a good college—perhaps 15 percent of households—this dream remained very attractive. MTV’s ideology remained extremely popular with some American youths, especially appealing to younger middle-class teenage girls. But, for teenagers who were growing up at a distance from
these monied circles, the rich, famous, and beautiful lifestyle now seemed light years away, a dream that had lost all credibility. These teens’ parents were working harder than ever, and yet their combined real incomes were no different from thirty years earlier. Most American teenagers were now forced to take on part-time menial jobs with low pay and no benefits, just to keep up with the fashions, video games, mp3 players, and social lives of their peers. They could not afford a four-year college and suspected that at best they could expect a very routinized and poorly paying job in a few years. These non-elite teens were caught in a bind: they were bombarded with MTV shows that attempted to entice them with the elite lifestyle, yet they had become increasingly aware that they were heading down a decidedly less glamorous path. With this research in hand, we concluded that MTV’s abandonment of the foundational rebel ideals of youth culture to embrace its bourgeois antithesis was its Achilles heel, the point of vulnerability for a cultural jujitsu maneuver.

**Ideological Opportunity:**

**Backlash against Rich, Famous, and Beautiful Youth Culture**

We discovered in our research that MTV was increasingly rubbing non-elite teens, especially males, the wrong way. A backlash against MTV was surfacing on the Internet. One Internet forum titled *MTV Sucks* elicited plenty of comments declaring that MTV had lost its rebel edge and was instead relying upon celebrity idols to shore up ratings. As one forum participant explained:

Don’t expect MTV to do anything controversial. Complaining that MTV won’t show a politically charged video makes about as much sense as complaining that ‘Everybody Loves Raymond’ hasn’t done a show on
bondage. MTV is the safe haven for Britney and N'Sync fans—it's not where you are going to find cutting-edge stuff. Go to your local independent record store.

As another participant put it:

Now it seems as though MTV (and all the countless channels initially inspired by MTV) is bashing individuality and replacing it with a message of conformity and trend dictation. 'Cribs' tells us to get a big pimped-out house. . . . What happened to the initial message of individuality and music. Does the money now lie in endorsing conformity and material gain? Of course it does, and MTV sold out to that idea years ago.

Seeking better to understand the ideological underpinnings of this backlash, we interviewed teens and young adults who agreed with, amongst other things, the statement “MTV sucks.” When we asked our interviewees what they hated most about MTV, they complained about “expensive parties for spoiled brats,” “whiny rich kids,” “millionaire teenage pop idols,” and, more generally, “shiny, happy, people all dressing and acting the same.” One interviewee, when asked to describe the typical MTV viewer, posited, “dumb, rich, frat guys and shallow girls who drive their daddy’s Saab.” The backlash, we determined, was an angry expression of the growing class divide. Our research allowed us to make a straightforward inference: the best ideological opportunity for Fuse was to challenge MTV with an ideology that channeled this deep disgruntlement with
the lifestyle of rich, famous, and beautiful by mounting a populist counterpoint. Nailing down the specifics of this counterpoint was the goal of our next phase of research.

**Source Materials: Culture Jammers as Populist Pranksters**

With a significant ideological opportunity in hand and a brand entirely lacking in any kind of equity, we went in search of the most compelling subculture, social movement, or media myth to mine for cultural content. We concluded immediately that we would need to look beyond the network’s loose confederation of subcultural programming efforts. We needed a broader and more rebellious platform. Youth music subcultures were not only fragmented, but had by this time become far too predictable and overused as expressions of youth rebellion. By 2003, corporations had become adept at paying off once-rebellious musicians in order to trade on their subcultural credibility. As a result, the rebel value of youth music subcultures had plummeted. We needed a more compelling platform, and one that specifically informed the teen class divide we had discovered. We asked: what subcultures or movements have the most resonance and credibility at this moment in history to mount a populist challenge against the world of the rich, famous, and beautiful?

We hypothesized that the anti-globalization movement would be a good place to dig. Not only did the movement offer a potent critique of the corporatization of youth subcultures, but its angry populism was a better fit with our target than, for instance, the constructive optimism of the green movement, which resonated primarily with elite youth. At the time, the anti-globalization
movement was rapidly gaining influence amongst our target. Naomi Klein’s book *No Logo*, a controversial anti-multinational screed, had shot to the number one position on best-seller lists in 2001, and sold more than one million copies by 2002. The book’s primary angle—a populist attack on big business—was helpful. It allowed us to think about how we could position MTV as part of the greedy global oligopolists that Klein dissed so aggressively.

Even more useful, though, was the particular movement that she lauded, illuminating a contingent that had existed on the margins for decades—the culture jammers. Culture jamming is a cultural form of resistance. Activists attack powerful institutions by sabotaging their public image. They added their own ironic additions and playful satires to the advertising of multinationals, and G8 meetings, and corporate headquarters buildings. Culture jamming offered a very contemporary and resonant subculture that we could repurpose to craft a populist rebuttal to MTV. We just needed to reframe the target a bit, and extend the mockery so that it took aim, not at the business practices of elites, but at their lifestyles as well.

**Cultural Strategy: Populist Prankster**

We sketched out a memo that posited a new ideology for Fuse, in which the music network would take on MTV’s celebration of elite lifestyle, using culture-jamming as the primary weapon.

Fuse stands by teens who think that MTV is only for elite snobs and celebrity sycophants and has abandoned everyone else. Fuse is about
music, plain and simple, stripped bare of all the fake lifestyle glitter. Whereas MTV idealizes youth who live the rich, famous and beautiful lifestyle, we at Fuse think this is a bad joke. Who gets to live this life after all? Fuse tears down this ridiculous façade to reveal life as it really is: not always beautiful, rarely rich, and often raunchy and seedy rather than glamorous. Hip is NOT a bunch of shiny happy people who all dress and act the same. We respect people who don’t give in to elite norms, even if they end up being distasteful or lewd according to some. We think anyone could be a better celebrity than the overpaid fakes that MTV throws at us. Even MTV’s production values drip money: super slick with a well-oiled style that spreads from graphics to set design to sonic signatures. We at Fuse don’t have much money, just like you. But we can have a lot of fun making do with what we’ve got.

With only a couple months to go before the restaging, our Fuse restaging team met in Rainbow Media’s Manhattan offices. We recognized that we needed to bring the new concept to life in as noisy a way as possible. We had only $1 million to launch the new network into a highly saturated media environment, cluttered with youth culture, youth marketing, and youth products. By using culture jamming to communicate provocatively our populist anti-MTV ideology, we believed that, even with a minimal budget, we could get the attention of music journalists, ad trade journalists, youth cultural bloggers, television news producers, and music fan communities. We figured that we could multiply the efficiency and effectiveness of our media buys on a vast scale by applying the principles we had discovered in the guerrilla branding
efforts that launched Ben & Jerry’s—the tactic we call provoking ideological flashpoints.

Culture Jam No. 1: Save the Music Video

One issue particularly annoyed our target teens, surfacing again and again in our interviews. Jaded interviewees loved to accuse MTV of abandoning its roots by drifting away from playing music videos. We knew from our discourse analysis that it would be easy to frame MTV’s abandonment of music videos in order to embrace rich, famous, and beautiful lifestyle programming as a large corporation’s “selling out” youth culture for the sake of corporate profits. By designing an ideologically charged prank to assert our counterpoint, we could strike MTV in its cultural Achilles heel.

We came up with an integrated cultural idea that we called “Help Save The Music Video”. The first component was a week-long on-air telethon in the style of a charity fundraiser. But, instead of asking our viewers to pledge their financial support, we asked them to pledge hours of slacking in front of their television, watching music videos. We invited as co-hosts various musicians whose videos MTV judged too offensive or distasteful to air. Marilyn Manson, for example, explained to the camera that “Music videos are really important because young children can be exposed to themes of violence and devil worship.” We constructed a large digital board to keep viewers apprised of the number of music videos saved.
To turn this idea into a media event, we decided to hire Sally Struthers as spokesperson for our cause. Sally originally starred as a plump hippie in *All in the Family* and had more recently become known for her public advocacy of Save the Children, the African poverty charity. As a has-been celebrity, Sally was the perfect antithesis of MTV-style glamour and fame-worship. And “save the children” provided distasteful wordplay for our tagline. In billboards, we juxtaposed Sally’s image against the headline “Please Help Save Music Videos. Watch Fuse.” For youth magazines, we created the headline “By Watching 3 Minutes a Day, You Can Show a Music Video that You Care.” For youth cultural websites, we created the headline “Right Now a Music Video is Being Neglected.” For trade magazines, we tweaked the message with the headline “The Children Are Hungry. For Music Videos.”

We bought a billboard in Times Square, directly across from MTV’s headquarters. MTV’s show *TRL* was shot live from MTV’s headquarters in a studio that looked out upon several billboards in Times Square. *TRL* had become one of the prime symbols of MTV’s reorientation toward celebrity bubblegum glamour, with this show overtly catering to screaming
teenyboppers hoping to catch a glimpse of star guests. What better way to draw attention to our new network’s populist prankster ideology than to place a billboard mocking MTV’s abandonment of music videos so that it would show up as a backdrop to one its most popular shows?

When we discovered that MTV’s parent company, Viacom, owned one of these billboards directly across from TRL, we saw the potential to up the ante on this prank. We thought it was very likely that Viacom’s managers would try to block our use of this billboard, once they had figured out that we were using it deride the crown jewel of their media empire. Framed in the right way, Viacom’s attempt to suppress our “Saving the Music Video” campaign could be exposed to the public as a monopolistic effort by a large, cynical corporation to subdue a cheeky, populist upstart—along the same lines as Ben & Jerry’s “What’s the Doughboy Afraid Of?” campaign. To make sure that Viacom would take the bait, we also placed ads on every available Viacom-owned phone booth in Times Square, and commissioned street teams to parade outside Viacom and MTV’s headquarters with sandwich boards, urging as many pedestrians as possible to help save the music video. We also supplied local coffee vendors with thousands of Fuse coffee cups to hand out in place of their regular coffee cups. Each Fuse coffee cup prominently featured a culture jam of MTV’s logo. One of these extended the logo’s prominent M into the word Monopoly. Another used the M to ask, “Where’s the M in emptee-vee?”

The day before the billboard was slated to go up, we sent its content to Viacom media executives for approval. Our team simultaneously leaked the content to
MTV executives, hoping that this would increase the chance that somebody at MTV or Viacom would try to do something to stop it. By mid-day, Viacom and MTV had taken the bait. First, MTV’s COO telephoned the CEO of Fuse’s parent company, to complain about the anti-MTV cups that had begun to appear in Times Square earlier in the day. Rosenthal described the message on the cups as a “personal affront.” Then, a top Viacom media executive telephoned Fuse president Marc Juris to say that they would not run the billboard, given its content and its location as a backdrop for TRL studios. The prank was underway.

Throughout the afternoon, the Fuse PR team leaked the ‘breaking news’ to the press, painting Viacom as a corporate goliath out to crush a little start-up that had the gall to challenge MTV. To escalate the prank, we then called Viacom ad sales executives to explain that we had leaked the story to the press and that they would get some very negative coverage unless they allowed the billboard to go up. Viacom then had little choice but to reverse their decision.

We invited the press to show up in Times Square the next morning to watch as the billboard went up. This became the second part of the story. The sight of workmen putting the billboard up piece by piece made for a
compelling visual for helicopter television news cameras as well as for ground photographers.

With the most influential newspapers, music journals, youth culture magazines, and television news networks all rushing in to break the story in real time, it became clear that the prank had struck a nerve. Our extremely frugal campaign to restore music video to its rightful place in youth culture generated phenomenal national coverage via editorial and PR pick-up of our efforts. Rolling Stone wrote about Fuse as a “small but flourishing” channel taking aim at MTV, applauding Fuse for the idea that “Music television should play music videos.” National news sources such as TV Guide, Entertainment Weekly, and the New York Times amplified Fuse’s cause with such headlines as “Fuse under MTV,” “The Music Channel that’s Giving MTV Competition,” and “Brash Music Network Rocks the Establishment.” In only a matter of days, we had seduced a wide range of media to give powerful expression to Fuse’s populist prankster ideology, free of charge. The stunt was beginning to paint MTV into a corner as the slick, cynical, corporate behemoth.

Culture Jam No. 2: Tacky Poverty-Stricken Beach House Mocks MTV’s Spoiled Rich Kids

To follow up, we considered what other content would allow us to dramatize our populist social class critique of MTV. Summer was approaching, and MTV’s airwaves would soon be filled with those “expensive parties for spoiled brats” that stuck in the craw of our target. We knew from our research that the MTV Beach House was one of the most salient examples of all that was wrong with
Every summer, MTV threw parties that the network broadcasted from a multi-million dollar mansion on the beach in a famous upper-class vacation spot. In 2002 and 2003, the MTV Beach House was located in East Quogue, one of the most wealthy and glamorous sections of the Hamptons. The MTV Beach House broadcasts featured expensive parties, screaming teenyboppers, and celebrity appearances. The 2003 MTV website described the beach house as “buff boys, bodacious babes and the swimsuits that make them sizzling.” This spectacle was centered on the rich, famous, and beautiful people showing off.

From a cultural strategy standpoint, this was low-hanging fruit. We designed a communications idea that would mock MTV’s annual beauty culture overdose in as provocative a way as possible. We decided to create our very own beach house: the Fuse Beach House.

We located the Fuse Beach House in a run-down motel in an anonymous suburb off of the New Jersey turnpike, surrounded by concrete, and miles from the beach. We then chose to populate the house with a motley assortment of people, clearly without much money: some had serious guts, several were senior citizens, and all were shabbily dressed. Most appeared to be socially marginal in some way or another: one was a geeky fantasy video gamer with a ponytail; another was a nerdy amateur karate expert; another sported uneven tan lines that suggested a leather S&M corset.
Instead of VIP events and celebrity visits, we had our vacationers engage in the most mundane activities that we could conjure up. The launch spot featured the Fuse Beach House revelers lining up to use a single porta-potty, set up in a parking lot, next to the beat-up swimming pool where they hung out. They wait impatiently, grimacing on account of their urinary discomfort. When someone opens the door to hassle the dawdler, and discovers that the porta-potty is empty, everybody in line gets ticked off. An end line declares, “Tons of music videos, but only one bathroom. The Fuse Beach House.” A second spot showcased several of the beach house members playing the kiddie pool game Marco Polo, in the motel’s fetid, nearly empty, pool. “Watch music videos and take a dip in our Olympic-sized fun puddle,” the end line urges. A third spot featured a Fuse Beach House music performance: a mild-mannered 60-year-old man tries and fails to find a guitar chord for the better part of a minute. Behind him, an octogenarian woman scrubs one of the motel room’s mildewed walls.

We then erected a billboard opposite the TRL studios to see if MTV executives would once again take the bait. The billboard featured the Fuse Beach House marquee in front of a dark, dirty, hotel room with our diverse cast of characters sitting around and looking bored. The ad’s headline, “It’s not the Hamptons. It’s not near the beach. It’s not even a house.” Reportedly, executives at MTV had been so rattled by the “Help Save the Music Video” billboard that they had set up an internal task force whose sole function was to monitor Fuse advertising. In this instance, they apparently had the billboard owner—the multinational music company Bertlesmann—reject the placement on the grounds that it was
too “tacky.” We could not resist telling the press about this, and once again the press delighted in covering the story.

We continued to extend the idea across a variety of non-traditional media. We erected a pop-up version of the Fuse Beach House in Times Square and had Fuse VJs broadcast from inside. The Beach House then traveled along with the WARPED tour, an underground music and extreme sports festival that featured alternative, punk, and hardcore bands. Fuse Beach House toiletry kits were handed out, which were of actual use to festival goers, and Fuse Beach House postcards were passed around, for people to send to family and friends. As part of this mobile Beach House, we set up a giant, Music Video Make-Out Couch. To draw further traffic to this interactive space, we erected The Fuse Music Video Slut, a large inflatable slide shaped like a giant blow-up doll. By the end of the Fuse Beach House campaign, Fuse audience ratings had increased 450 percent with no significant change to the network’s programming.

Culture Jam No. 3: F-List Celebrities Mock MTV’s Fame Worship
We continued to look for the most opportune MTV content to mock as we moved into the fall of our first season. Using our cultural strategy lens we identified the MTV Video Music Awards as another obvious target. A much-hyped annual event for MTV, the VMAs had become a “wannabe” version of the Oscars and the Grammies: its pre-show provided glimpses of the rich and the famous arriving and walking up the red carpet; its main event featured celebrities introducing acts and handing out awards; its after-parties supplied fodder to the celebrity gossip sections of newspapers, magazines, blogs, and
websites. In the early 2000s, the spectacle focused on boy bands such as N Sync and the Back Street Boys, pop princesses such as Britney Spears, Christina Aguilera, Beyonce Knowles, and Jennifer Lopez, and celebrities who had little to do with music, such as Lindsay Lohann, Drew Barrymore, Gwyneth Paltrow, and Selma Hayek. By 2003, the VMAs had become a major celebrity gossip event, attracting significant coverage from the likes of Access Hollywood, E!, and Teen People.

To mock MTV’s snobby celebration of A-List celebrities, we set up a series of endorsements by people that celebrity culture had cast out as uncool, unglamorous, and crass. We signed up Sy Sperling, president of the Hair Club for Men. Sy’s hair club was one of the largest companies in the hair-replacement industry, and his infomercials had become a staple of late night cable television. He was widely known for his obnoxious trademark sign-off, “I’m not just the president, I’m also a client.” In our communications, we had him declare, “The only thing better than a club about hair is watching music videos on Fuse.”
We signed up Tammy Faye Bakker, an evangelist, Christian singer, author, and television personality. Her fame peaked in the late 1980s and early 1990s when her televangelist husband Jim Bakker became one of the most influential fundamentalist celebrities, opening the Heritage Village USA amusement park and heading up the widely-syndicated Praise the Lord (PTL) Club television show. He was indicted for defrauding this evangelical organization, and directing millions of dollars of funds for his personal use and sexual escapades. Perhaps because of her tendency to wear heavy make-up, Tammy Faye enjoyed a lingering presence in popular culture, albeit as the butt of jokes of late-night talk-show hosts, and of youth cultural cartoons such as South Park. We had Tammy endorse our new network by saying, “I saw the light. It was a TV and it had music videos on it.”

We then brought Miss Cleo on board. Miss Cleo was a self-proclaimed psychic and shaman who rose to fame in the early 2000s through her numerous ads for her psychic hotline. She was particularly appealing to us because she had recently made headlines when she had been accused of deceptive advertising, billing, and collection practices. We talked Miss Cleo into endorsing Fuse with the statement, “Will you find love? . . . No. Will you be rich? . . . No. At least you have music videos on Fuse.”

Finally, we recruited Robin Byrd to our cause. Robin was a former porn star, most notably featuring in the porn classic Debbie Does Dallas. She was also a staple of late-night television through her public-access cable television show The Robin Byrd Show. By 2003, the show had run for nearly thirty years and had
become known for its less-than-glamorous stripper guests, its cheesy graphics, and its lo-fi production values. For Robin, we created the headline, “When I’m not making porn, watching porn, downloading porn, or hanging out with porn stars, I like to watch Fuse.” This culture jam also generated phenomenal national media coverage, announcing to non-elite youth that Fuse offered a populist sanctuary from MTV’s bombardment of aspirational wealth and glamour.

**Extending the Populist Challenge beyond MTV**

By the end of the first year, our MTV culture jam had gained enormous traction. However, we were worried that, if we continually pranked MTV, our efforts would become predictable and stale, just the opposite of what a talented populist prankster should do. We needed to keep surprising the teens who were now paying attention to Fuse. So we made a decision to extend our populist culture jamming to other sacred icons of the rich, famous, and beautiful lifestyle. The first choice was easy—the Apple iPod.

Culture Jam No. 4: The Populist Prankster Takes on Apple

In the spring of 2004, iPods became the must-have fashion statement for upper-middle-class youth and young adults. (Of course, the iPod would eventually diffuse much more widely, but at its high initial
price point, it first gained traction amongst the upper middle class.) The media buzz was deafening: iPod was the single most fawned-over, talked-about, and written-about phenomenon in the music industry. From our cultural lens, the iPod was perfect fodder for a populist culture jam. Apple was an elite, expensive brand that was conspicuously consumed by the most educated segment of society. Apple was a “sacred cow” in America, a company that was so good at what it did and so cool that no one would dare critique it—a perfect example of the kind of lemming-like attraction to fame that Fuse should challenge.

The iPod “Silhouettes” advertising was one of the most famous campaigns of this era. But, to us, it seemed to celebrate a worldview of clean-cut, bourgeois, pseudo-individuality. The silhouetted images featured iPod listeners either dancing by themselves or playing air guitar. Each character sported a clichéd hipster haircut. The ads seemed to imply that air guitaring or dancing while wearing headphones was somehow a cool, rebellious gesture.

These immediately recognizable graphics provided the point of leverage for our culture jam. We hijacked the design code to invert Apple’s stylish upper-middle-class ways. Ours would be an affront to polite middle-class society—as dumb-ass and vulgar as we could get past the media censors. In one ad, we featured the
silhouette of a young man watching television with a match, lighting his fart on fire. In another ad, a silhouette of another young man watches television with his pants around his ankles and a jar of hand cream by his side. In another, a woman watches television naked while hanging upside from a stripper pole. In a two-page spread, a man performs fellatio on a woman on one side, and then the woman reciprocates on the other side.

Once again, we decided to orchestrate a real-time news media stunt. We leaked our ads to Steve Jobs, CEO and founder of Apple Computer, just as they were going up on billboards and showing up in magazines. Almost immediately, we received a ‘cease and desist’ letter, in which Apple threatened a lawsuit. We then circulated Apple’s letter to the media, giving it our populist spin. The press bit on the story, turning an extremely frugal media buy of less than $500,000 into a national media phenomenon. One newspaper headline read “Apple Blows Fuse over Ads.” Another read “Apple Fussy; Accuses Fuse over Parody Ads.”

**Conclusion**

Using culture jams to provoke ideological flashpoints, our frugal guerrilla branding efforts consistently generated phenomenal national coverage. With a budget that could only be a rounding error for MTV, Fuse became the cultural leader of music television, along the way repositioning MTV as a slick, cynical corporate behemoth out of touch with today’s youth.

The impact on advertisers was stunning: Fuse won more than sixty new advertisers in the first year of the campaign, while ratings quadrupled in the
months following the network relaunch and doubled overall year on year. Fuse sustained these gains until our clients Marc Juris and Mary Corigliano left to run Court TV, and we moved with them to help revitalize that network.

Our success in launching Fuse demonstrates that blue oceans can exist at the very heart of mature categories, if you view such opportunities in terms of ideology instead of better mousetraps. Innovation opportunities do not necessarily require searching for unorthodox value combinations outside existing categories, or waiting for a new-to-the-earth technology to drop out of the sky. One particularly efficient way to break through in mature categories is to play off the well-known cultural expressions of a powerful incumbent. We take advantage of the market power of the incumbent to provide a platform for the challenger, what we call cultural jujitsu.