

Marketing a classic

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [March 24, 1999](#) issue

Nothing's sacred. Those of us who look for continuity in culture have always known that we could count on certain trademarks and products. Coca-Cola was there for the ages, as unchanging as the Catholic Church seemed prior to Vatican II. But Catholicism changed and so did Coca-Cola. Catholicism is scrambling halfway back and Coca-Cola came back all the way, but had to stamp "Classic" on the cans to clarify things.

If there is another trademark for the ages, it would have to be Levi's. *The Dictionary of Eponyms: Names That Became Words* lists Levi's near Listerine. It's as eponymic as Kleenex and Xerox, the "synonym for jeans, denims or dungarees," bearing copper rivets at strain points—"this innovation making [Levi's] especially valuable to miners, who often loaded their pockets with ore samples." And Levi's triumphed as the name synonymous with "tight-fitting, heavy blue denims."

Now Levi's is losing business. And the Levi Strauss company plans to shut down 11 of its 22 U.S. plants and cut jobs. Most commentators agree that the company did not address the generation gap, so the Gap and other competitors moved in.

Levi's kept making "tight-fitting heavy blue denims" of the sort Dad and Mom wore, a fact that gave the young three reasons to go elsewhere, for loose, anti-Dad, non-Mom apparel. An Atlanta consultant, Al Ries, says, "You can stretch denim over a wide butt, but you can't stretch it over too many generations. The problem is, parents wore Levi's and kids want to wear something different."

The company's sales dropped a billion dollars in one year alone while competitors took up the denim slack. Phat Farm, JNCO, Old Navy, FUBU, Calvin Klein and Gloria Vanderbilt joined the Gap in challenging the almost changeless old pro. Great-great-great grandnephews of founder Levi Strauss know they have to effect some *aggiornamento* in the firm. So they'll make looser pants and sponsor MTV Video Music Awards, hoping to lure back the casual and fickle young.

One can picture a good deal of reading and misreading of this kind of venture by churchpeople. The market disciples are quick to copy the MTV approach, do market research and change everything "but the gospel itself," they would say, as they change everything so much that the gospel gets wide-butted, too. A teen quoted in one story said, "I don't get into designer. I wear whatever is comfortable." The church-growth market counselors ought to leap at that, as they prophesy and look for the demise of their competitors: the denominations, the church bodies, the bearers of tradition.

Of course, the church can learn from Levi's intransigence. But the Levi's story gives the impression that very heavy work is going into analyzing a very fickle, always unstable market. There is balanced adaptation and there is frenetic compromise on the part of various groups trying to keep up with popular culture. Who wins?

Had I a time capsule I'd put in it a note that says: "In a few years 'the kids' will get tired of wide-butt jeans, the merely casual fashion, the obsession with informal culture, and we will see stories about 'The Return to Levi's.' Of course, they won't be made in the U.S.A., but then, neither is the gospel. But the Word has a great market potential here, among those who believe you cannot tailor the gospel to fit all as they are. Maybe slimmer bottoms will be part of the anatomy of potential purchasers, and Levi's will be back."