

An Overnight Success Since 1879

Lars Olsson Smith -- The King of Vodka Absolut Vodka is a contemporary phenomenon. First exported in 1979, Absolut Vodka quickly soared to one of the best-selling premium vodkas in the world today. It is an overnight success... an overnight success since 1879. It was then vodka was first sold under the name Absolut. Yet, Swedish vodka has its roots in the 15th century when Swedes first started distilling spirits called "bränvin", literally "burnt wine". Made from grain or imported wine, these spirits were originally used mostly as medicine and for making gunpowder. The first alcohol restrictions had nothing to do with sobriety; distilled spirits were needed for Sweden's war machine.

Human nature being what it is, however, people soon found spirits had a number of more recreational uses. By the 17th century, the distilled spirit that we today refer to as vodka had become a national drink. The phenomenal success of Absolut Vodka has only one precedent: the success of the man who introduced it.

Successful businessman at 10 and entrepreneur at 14, Lars Olsson Smith controlled one third of all the vodka in Sweden while he was still learning to shave. For almost half of the 19th century he was known as "The King of Vodka". In 1879, he introduced a new kind of vodka called "Absolut Rent Bränvin" (Absolute Pure Vodka) produced using a revolutionary new distillation method. The method was called rectification, a method we still use today. Without knowing it, Lars Olsson Smith had introduced what exactly a century later, would become Absolut Vodka.

The Vodka Wars

Not only did Smith create a purer and better-tasting vodka, he also started a trade war against the city of Stockholm. Smith was an entrepreneur in every sense of the word and didn't take kindly to the city monopoly on distilled spirits. He refused to apply for a permit to sell his product in Stockholm and instead opened a vodka store next to his distillery on the island of Reimersholme, just outside the city limits. He sold his vodka by offering a free shuttle boat to the island - an incredible marketing initiative for the period! The store was a huge success, much to the dismay of the Stockholm spirits monopoly. The trade war escalated, shots were even fired. Smith responded by expanding his business, turning his sights towards southern Sweden, a region for centuries famous for its vodka production.

The Rich Wheat Fields of Southern Sweden

At the end of the 1870's, more than half of all alcohol in Sweden was produced in the Skane region in the southern part of the country. Once again, Lars Olsson Smith went on the offensive, taking over a number of distilleries in the region while attacking existing distribution channels that were selling what he considered to be inferior products. He even used labor unions to boycott retail outlets selling low quality products.

Towards the end of the century, Smith started to export his spirits with great success, making him one of the richest men in the country, a fortune he would lose, regain and lose again. When he died in 1913, he was penniless, leaving behind him nothing but debts, angry letters and lawsuits. And the Absolut Vodka concept - a purer vodka with a heritage of innovative marketing. Lars Olsson Smith: on every bottle, in every bottle.

A New Generation Of Pioneers

Lars Olsson Smith's technical know-how and business sense did not die with him. In the 1970's, a worthy successor was found in Lars Lindmark. President of V&S Vin & Sprit AB (The Swedish Wine and Spirits Corporation) Lindmark soon set about modernizing the respected old company. With the 100 year anniversary of Absolut Rent Bränvin approaching, he made the decision to export a new vodka. The finest vodka modern distilling techniques could produce, a new product that was a century old: Absolut Vodka. With little experience in advertising, packaging and product positioning, he created a marketing team and set about trying to come up with a new positioning for the new Absolut Vodka. They were aiming high; they had set their sights on the US market, the most competitive vodka market in the world, but also the most lucrative. The US consumes more than 60% of all vodka produced in the western world. Consumption patterns in the US showed that while overall spirits consumption was decreasing, consumption of premium vodka was increasing. The decision was made to market Absolut Vodka as a premium product with a long tradition, meant for a discerning consumer. It was the first time in this century that Sweden had exported any alcoholic beverage on such a large basis.

Absolut in a Paper Bag?

At first, the ideas centered around the traditional Swedish origins of the brand. There were a number of early suggestions including "Swedish Blonde Vodka", with pillaging Vikings on the label and "Royal Court Vodka", a frosted carafe. There was even a bottle wrapped in paper. None of these ideas was felt to adequately communicate the product and its tradition. Marketing surveys carried out showed that the time was definitely right for a premium vodka. There was a clearly discernible consumer trend towards "white" spirits as opposed to "brown" spirits; clearer spirits were seen as being purer and healthier. There was a niche for premium vodka waiting to be developed. But the question of how to package and market it still remained. American experts were called in. They recommended modern-looking packaging with a bright, colorful label that would stand out on the shelf. They recommended a royal touch, mimicking so many of the "Czar themes" on the market at the time. The Swedish team was less than thrilled. Gradually, they came to realize that the answer was much the same as the concept created 100 years earlier by Lars Olsson Smith.

A Swedish Medicine Bottle Becomes The Latest in Glass Design

The breakthrough came when a bottle was finally chosen. Like many breakthroughs it came purely by chance and in retrospect seems almost too obvious.

Advertising man Gunnar Broman was looking through an antique shop window in Stockholm's "Old Town" when he saw an old Swedish medicine bottle, a cultural icon was unchanged for more than a hundred years. The bottle was elegant, different, simple and very Swedish. In the 16th and 17th centuries vodka had been sold in pharmacies as medicine to cure everything from colic to the plague.

The choice was a stroke of genius. Several Swedish designers were given the job of helping the Absolut Vodka team further develop the bottle. It had been decided that there should be no label to hide the crystal clear contents. After much discussion and several prototypes the team came to the conclusion that some kind of colored lettering was required. Blue was decided upon as the most visible and attractive color, the color that is still used today for the famous Absolut Vodka logo

The Name Absolut

V&S Sprit AB now had a product and a package. What they didn't have was a name. The original product was called "Absolut Rent Brännvin", which was modified to "Absolute Pure Vodka", a name that for legal reasons could not be registered in the US - "absolute" was a common adjective and could not be a trademark. The final "e" was dropped removing the legal obstacle and adding an extra Swedish touch. "Pure" also posed legal problems and was removed. The slogan "Country of Sweden" was added between the main elements to stress the vodka's origin and its tradition of purity.

"It Will Never Sell!"

When the Absolut Vodka team started to look for a distributor in the US they met with a reception colder than a chilled cocktail glass. One company that didn't lack foresight was Carillon Importers Ltd. based in Manhattan. The company was led by Al Singer, a true non-conformist who was ready to accept the challenge the moment he saw the product. The company had only one salesman, Michel Roux, who was to play a leading role in the marketing and distribution of Absolut Vodka. As Absolut Vodka grew and Carillon with it, he eventually became president and a driving force behind the success of the product. A few final changes were made to the bottle - the now famous medallion of Lars Olsson Smith was added and the neck was made a little longer. The first consignment of Absolut Vodka was filled at the Åhus distillery on April 17, 1979 and Absolut Vodka went on sale for the first time in the US in Boston two months later.

Åhus, Sweden

Every drop of Absolut Vodka consumed in the world today comes from the same place: our distilleries near Åhus in southern Sweden, for centuries a region famous for its vodka. We use grain from nearby fields and water from our own well. By having complete control over all phases of production, we can personally ensure the high quality of every single bottle. Built in 1906, the Åhus distillery combines the best of old, local distilling tradition with the best of modern technology. This small town of barely 10,000 inhabitants not only produces, but packs and ships all the millions upon millions of liters of Absolut Vodka consumed around the world.

Record-Breaking Success In The US

In its first year on the US market, only 10,000 nine-liter cases of Absolut Vodka were sold. The product was launched first in Boston; then New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco and eventually all over the country. By 1982, Absolut Vodka had passed a major Finnish competitor that had entered the US market ten years earlier! In 1985, the biggest Russian competitor was overtaken, making Absolut Vodka the leading imported vodka in the US. The same year, just six short years after the first sales in Boston, Absolut Vodka made its way into the top 100 most sold spirits in the world, according to an international trade magazine. Since 1994, Absolut Vodka has been ranked among the top ten international premium spirits brands.

Absolut Vodka Around the World

After its success, both in its home country and in the US, Absolut Vodka was introduced in most European, Asian and Pacific countries starting in the mid-80's. Growth in Europe has proven to be different from the US; every country has its own firmly entrenched drinking traditions, its own culture and language.

Creativity is that simple surprise and delight of seeing familiar things in a new way.

From the very beginning, when Absolut vodka was first exported, we decided to be different - to surprise and delight. Absolut Vodka created a whole type of advertising that stretched the boundaries between advertising and art. The ads are all witty variations on the same simple theme: a picture of the Absolut Vodka bottle with a two to three word caption starting with the word Absolut and often saying something complimentary about the product or its consumer. A flash of recognition comes as you make the unlikely connection. The first ad, "Absolut Perfection" appeared in 1980 and had a distinctive wit that redefined alcohol advertising.

The Confessions of an Adman

Adman Geoff Hays of the TBWA ad agency in New York was asked to come up with a campaign for Absolut Vodka. The Stockholm team had taken great care to outline a campaign for the new product based on very specific guidelines - all advertising should center around the bottle, the product should not be identified with any particular lifestyle and the approach should have a timeless yet contemporary feel to it. Thousands of miles away, Hayes took these ideas one step further. The story goes that the idea for "Absolut Perfection" and the Absolut Vodka campaign came to him in the bath. At that moment, in a New York bathtub, 400 years of Swedish tradition became a modern phenomenon.

Absolut Makes The Evening News

Absolut Vodka was a hit with the public from the very beginning. Today it's a media sensation. People talk about Absolut Vodka ads the way you would talk about the latest movie or novel; the creativity of our advertising regularly makes the evening news.

Absolut Vodka gets coverage in every medium. It gets thousands of articles and countless sound bites of free exposure on TV.

The Absolut Akademi

To insure that our product remains competitive for a long time to come, Absolut Vodka even has its own institute of higher learning where knowledge is used as a powerful sales tool. The curriculum covers all aspects of Absolut Vodka from advertising and marketing to history and production. The materials include a one-of-a-kind interactive CD-I, provocative course materials and the kind of surprises you have come to expect from the brand.

Absolut PR

In addition to its unique advertising, Absolut vodka also has PR that gets people talking and the brand noticed. In the far north of Sweden, for example, there is a hotel built entirely of ice. In its bar there is a 5 meter (15 ft.) high ice sculpture of the Absolut Vodka bottle. The hotel and the bottle have been featured on dozens of TV programs around the world. Absolut Vodka also publishes a highly-acclaimed magazine distributed in 110 countries around the world.

Bar Styling

Our display materials have won a number of awards in the industry and our bar styling programs are attracting increasing attention. Absolut Vodka promotions are meant to add that extra touch.

Absolut – Always An Event

Always fond of stretching borders, Absolut Vodka regularly re-defines the word event. When Absolut Vodka is involved in an event, the borders between *art*, *fashion*, *PR* and *marketing* blur long before the first drink is poured. For example, when Absolut Vodka commissioned Helmut Newton to photograph Absolut fashion creations, the photographs were presented at exhibitions from Madrid to New York to Berlin – all attended by the world elite of the fashion and art world. Even the simplest bar promotion takes on a special Absolut twist. Instead of handing out a T-shirt with every drink, Absolut will typically commission a local artist to paint a limited number of Absolut Vodka T-shirts to be raffled off at the end of the night.

Christmas Ads

For a number of years, Absolut Vodka has created sensational Christmas ads, ads so unusual that they almost always make news – a talking Christmas card, a real working snow glove magazine insert, a designer handkerchief, even designer gloves by Donna Karan.

In 1992, Absolut Vodka gave away a trendy pair of designer nylons in the holiday issue of Vogue. The same year, a Christmas tree imported from Sweden and cut to the shape of the Absolut Vodka bottle, was seen in London's Covent Garden.

Collector's Item

Our magazine ads have become collectors items. Many people have taken to wallpapering their rooms with them. Every year, Absolut's PR and advertising agencies get and respond to thousands of requests for advertising reprints. Still, we are extremely careful not to send any ads or PR material to anyone under age.

Tailor-Made ads

Absolut Vodka often makes custom ads to suit particular magazines. "Absolut Centerfold" appeared as a fold-out in Playboy. The bottle was stripped naked of its lettering and was featured bunny style complete with measurements and interests. "Absolut Index" was a tribute to the US magazine Harper's famous "Index". Also in vogue: a tailor-made Absolut Fashion campaign in Vogue magazine by legendary photographer Helmut Newton.

From Palate to Palette

Contemporary, yet timeless; witty, yet sophisticated; both the ads and the product have become modern icons and slipped into that gray area just between advertisement and art. Looking back, it is only natural that Absolut Vodka should enter the art world. The story of Absolut Art began in 1985, when Andy Warhol, the godfather of pop art, famous for his interpretations of soup cans and Marilyn Monroe, was commissioned to do a painting of the Absolut Vodka Bottle. When the painting appeared as an ad it was an incredible success and got immediate worldwide media attention. Absolut went from popular vodka to pop art and became an icon. Absolut Art had begun.

Absolut - The Global Art Gallery

Absolut Vodka's art commissions differ from traditional sponsorship. Instead of simply donating money to artists, we help promote talent by bringing it into the international spotlight. Absolut Vodka has become a kind of global art gallery. Chosen artists must display those qualities of taste, refinement and originality that appeal to Absolut Vodka consumers. The artists are given complete creative freedom, the only stipulation being that the bottle must be visible in the work. Selected art sits are usually established or up-and-coming. Sometimes, however, virtual unknowns are commissioned, their work seen for the first time by a large audience. Such was the case with "Absolut Glasnost", a collection of works by 26 Soviet artists, many of whom had never had their art exhibited outside what was then the Soviet Union. We worked closely with art associations in Moscow to find artists who would be of international interest. The works appeared in an insert in the magazine Interview, in 1990, the issue timed to coincide with Gorbachov's visit to the US. Naturally, Gorbachov was presented with the first copy of that issue.

Thinking Big Without Using Broad Strokes

Absolut Vodka has, over the years, commissioned not only painters, but artists in all the disciplines: sculptors like Arman, crystal glass designers like Bertil Vallien, fashion designers like David Cameron and John Galliano. Sometimes, Absolut Art can go to such extremes as an 11 meter (33 ft.) high ice sculpture of the Absolut Vodka bottle done in the Swiss Alps. Absolut Vodka artists work in all fields, including a field in eastern Kansas sown in the shape of an Absolut Vodka bottle. The size of 12 football fields and visible only from the air, the unique piece of "agro-art" was created by Stan Herd, known for his sunflower portrait of Vincent Van Goy. At Absolut Vodka, we think big, yet no one has ever accused us of using broad strokes. In the US, in the beginning of the nineties, we published "Absolut Artists of the Nineties", a 40-page spread in the glossy art magazine Art and Antiques featuring 36 artists who promise to be at the forefront of the emerging artistic trends of the decade. The works are of every conceivable style from Dali-type surrealism to cowboy-kitsch. The insert took up nearly a fourth of the magazine.

Absolut Fashion

Absolut Vodka entered the fashion world in a big way with a small dress. Absolut Cameron was the caption in 1987 with Absolut photographer Steve Bronstein shot model Rachel Williams in a one-of-a-kind dress creation. The commission was a much noticed one and since then Absolut Vodka has had a regular involvement in the fashion world. Absolut Vodka has asked famous and less known designers to create everything from dresses to ties. Absolut Fashions are often worth their weight in gold. One example is Anthony Ferrara's solid gold dress – made entirely out of 18K gold, 7 kilos (16 pounds) of it to be exact. Price: USD 530,000. In the spirit of Christmas, Absolut Vodka enclosed a pair of designer gloves by Donna Karan in the December issue of the US magazine New York.

Is It Real Or Is It Edelman?

Swedish-Finnish Absolut artist Yrjö Trompe-l'oeil paintings featuring ultra-realistically painted bits of paper and tape. So realistic are the works that they often have to be touched up during an exhibition when patrons find the temptation to touch them too great.

Absolut Statehood

The most ambitious art commissioning program so far is "Absolut Statehood", a US campaign spanning two years. The campaign spotlighted one work from each of the 50 American states and the District of Columbia, each done by a talented local artist from that state. A different work appeared every other week in USA Today, a national newspaper with a readership of over 6 million. A limited edition of 300 lithographs of each work, signed and numbered by the artist, were sold to the general public for USD 300 each. All revenues from these sales went to the national US organization Design Industries Foundation for AIDS (DIFFA).

Awards

Creativity may be its own reward, but it doesn't hurt to win an award or two. To say Absolut Vodka's advertising has been honored in the advertising industry is a bit of an understatement. Absolut Vodka is the only product in history to have won both the most coveted prizes in the US advertising business – the Effie and the Kelly awards. To top it all off, Absolut is to date one of only three brands inducted into the American Marketing Association's Hall of Fame. The other two are Coca-Cola and Nike.

Absolut Cities and Cities Of Europe

Absolut Cities and Absolut Cities of Europe are two of the most visible print campaigns in recent years. Absolut Cities of Europe appeared on the inside back cover of Newsweek, one city every other issue. On the page facing each ad was a lively article by Newsweek's own journalists describing the most exciting restaurants and bars in that city.

Absolut - An Overnight Success Since 1879

Sweden has an age-old vodka distilling tradition. Vodka was first sold legally in Sweden in 1498 by a Stockholm tavern keeper. Absolut Vodka was introduced in Sweden in 1879 as "Absolut rent branvin" - "Absolutely pure vodka". Lars Olsson Smith, famous entrepreneur and father of Absolut Vodka, applied a new method of distillation using rectification. The result was the purest vodka ever produced. Although major technical improvements have been made since then, we still use his method today.

International Sales Phenomenon

Absolut Vodka was first exported in 1979 and immediately caught on with consumers. In a short time, Absolut Vodka has gone from a Swedish domestic vodka to one of the world's 10 leading spirits brands. In 1994, Vin & Spirit AB, the Swedish producer, sold over 49 million liters of Absolut Vodka. Absolut Vodka is today the number one selling imported vodka in the US, Canada, Finland and several other countries.

Around The Globe

Absolut Vodka is now available in over 80 countries around the world. Be it in Europe, the Americas, Asia or Australia, chances are good that people are enjoying their favorite Absolut Vodka.

The Absolut Family

In addition to the original Absolut Vodka blue label (40%) there are four other Absolut Vodkas - Absolut Vodka red label (50%), for those who prefer a higher proof, Absolut Citron, flavored with a blend of selected fresh citrus fruits, Absolut Peppar, spiced with jalapeno peppers and the new member of the family - Absolut Kurant, flavored with natural black currant berries.

Quality Comes First

All Absolut Vodka sold in the world is produced in the same places, Åhus in southern Sweden. This is to retain complete quality control over raw materials and production and thereby maintain a consistently high quality in all aspects. This area has an age-old tradition of vodka production thanks to perfect environmental and climatic conditions.

"Produced at the famous distilleries near Åhus" means quality from 400 years of Swedish know-how with good support from nature.

The Production Process

Grain from the surrounding wheat fields of Åhus is delivered by the local farmers. The wheat is dried, ground and the bran removed. Water is added to remove the insoluble protein gluten and the mixture is boiled. After cooling, natural enzymes turn the starch into sugar. Then yeast is added, and in this stage the sugar is converted to alcohol. The mixture is distilled and rectified - purified of unwanted alcohol derivatives. To this pure springwater is added from our own local well. The result is Absolut Vodka - pure, while still retaining the characteristic aroma of grain, making Absolut Vodka the supreme choice, enjoyed straight, on the rocks or as base in cocktails or drinks.

A Media Sensation

The simple, but sophisticated Absolut ads - a picture of the bottle accompanied by a witty caption - have not only broken advertising records year after year, but have captured the imagination of the general public. Absolut Vodka is news. The latest ads often get journalistic coverage in magazines and on TV. Everybody talks about our campaigns - be it the "Absolut Manhattan" ad showing an aerial view of New York's Central Park in the shape of an Absolut Vodka bottle or 26 Russian painters making their own most personal impressions of our bottle. Over the years Absolut has commissioned not only over 300 painters, but leading artists in all fields; sculptors, glass designers, musicians and fashion designers. The Absolut Vodka bottle has become something of a modern icon. Inspired by the classic Swedish medicine bottle of the 18th and 19th centuries, the bottle is a harmonious blend of traditional Swedish glass-making craft and the best of contemporary design.

Sources : <http://www.absolutad.com/>