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Towards the holy grail of defining ‘brand’

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Abstract. *As an intangible asset, the meaning of ‘brand’ varies between managers in the same organization striving to increase their brand’s performance. This paper considers from an evolutionary perspective how brand interpretations vary and a unifying definition is postulated. Key Words ● brand definition ● brand meanings ● evolving brand spectrum*

Evolutionary brand interpretations

Diverse interpretations of ‘brand’ are noted both in the literature (Strizhakova et al., 2008) and among managers (de Chernatony and Dall’Olmo Riley, 1999). Without a common interpretation among the pan-company team supporting the brand, resources are likely to be sub-optimally employed and the brand is unlikely to achieve its potential. A plethora of interpretations are documented in the literature, yet without some basis for understanding their inter-relationship, their documentation is only of partial usefulness. Goodyear (1996) and Kunde (2000) were some of the early authors to show how brands evolve over time. Building on their frameworks and considerable interaction with brand marketers in product and services sectors, it is postulated that brand interpretations among the brand management team follow the evolutionary spectrum shown in Figure 1.

The logic behind this spectrum and detail about each stage are now addressed.

Differentiation

One of the initial roles of a brand is to attract attention and stand out from competitors. Unfortunately, where there is a lack of branding sophistication, emphasising attributes such as logos, colour and design, without associating these with unique benefits curtails brand success (Keller et al., 2008). The American

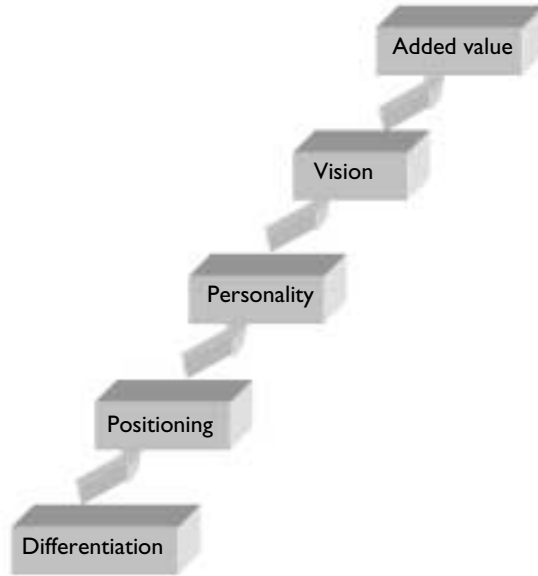


Figure 1

Managerial evolving interpretations of ‘brand’

Marketing Association (AMA) brand definition captures brands at this level, i.e. ‘name, term, sign, symbol or design, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods or services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors’. The problem is this is similar to the definition of a trademark.

If the AMA definition were to talk about ‘differentiation through association with a unique benefit’, the values based richness of brand could encourage more expansionary brand building programmes. Given consumers’ finite cognitive capabilities (Mittal et al., 2008), the logo, colour or design could link to a bigger chunk in memory (Miller, 1956) representing the unique benefits of the brand.

Positioning

Some managers escape the ‘logoization’ mentality and, undertaking gap analysis then working with innovation and process teams, strive to deliver and communicate a functional advantage. Focusing predominantly on customer delighting functional benefits (Barwise and Meehan, 2004) they develop strategies to fight through a sea of sameness to register the brand’s functional benefit in customers’ minds (Jones, 2000). Provided there is clarity of internal communications (Simmons, 2000) and an integrated production and delivery strategy, the brand’s



functionality should meet customers' expectations. The problem is that this is non-sustainable.

Personality

Attentive not only to *what* customers receive, but *how* they receive it (Grönroos, 2007; Vargo and Lusch, 2004), brand marketers recognize that it is cognition plus effect that influences brand choice. The feelings about a brand result from the emotions stirred by brand communications (Franzen and Bouwman, 2001) and the organizational cultures that drive different forms of staff behaviour (Cameron and Quinn, 2006). These are more sustainable than functionality. With a chief engagement officer (Smythe, 2007) who works closely with the directors of Internal Values Management (HR) and External Values Delivery (Marketing), employees are encouraged to be living exemplars of their brands (Ind and Bjerke, 2007), interacting with stakeholders in a manner that reinforces their brand values (de Chernatony and Cottam, 2008; Martin and Hetrick, 2006). To enable stakeholders to consistently have the same desired feelings about the brand from their contact with employees, brand and staff values alignment programmes are implemented (Barrow and Moseley, 2005) to minimize the effect from brand saboteurs (Wallace and de Chernatony, 2008).

When the values of employees resonate with the desired brand values communicated to customers, there is greater trust. Customers feel more confident selecting brands to reflect their self-identity (Escalas and Bettman, 2005) as well as facilitating membership of particular social groups (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001).

Vision

To sustain employee commitment (Domm, 2001), give a clear sense of direction (Kakabadse et al., 2005) and be better regarded in society (Edwards and Day, 2005), the senior management team spend time considering how their brand can make the world a better place. They strive to consider how their brand values can contribute to enhance societal well-being. A promise is sought, for example a bank and ethical investment, a car and protecting national parks (de Chernatony, 2006). As brand communities make increasing use of the internet to test the integrity of brands and to have greater dialogues with managers about the societal significance of brands (Weber, 2007), the visionary interpretation of brand should encourage greater customer commitment.

Added value

At this sophisticated level, pan-value chain-driven management consistently strives to deliver the same welcomed relationship at every point of contact (Hatch



and Schultz, 2001). Having significantly narrowed the identity-image gap (Kapferer, 2008) and successfully minimized customers' perceived risk (Conchar et al., 2004), the brand adds value to customers' lifestyles. By enabling the customer to become a co-creator of value through providing interactive tools over the internet (e.g. LEGO, Jones Soda, Nike), a community of respect builds around the brand. The senior management team utilize brand equity measurements to fine tune brand strategies to drive higher brand valuation results.

A concluding definition

The evolutionary brand spectrum clarifies why and how managers have diverse interpretations of brands. In this amoebic state a brand could be defined as a cluster of values that enables a promise to be made about a unique and welcomed experience. This captures the way that emphasis may initially be placed on functionally oriented values, which then become augmented with emotionally oriented values, as brand management sophistication increases, driving a visionary promise that adds value to all stakeholders.

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