



Silver Medal Winner Effects: Implications for Positioning

Albert Caruana

Viewers of the recent Turin 2006 Winter Olympics and other sports activities have probably noticed something during the medal ceremonies: athletes who won bronze medals for finishing third had broader smiles than those who had won silver. Certainly, this was an observation of the 1992 Barcelona Summer Olympics and 2000 Sydney Summer Olympics that led to research asking students to watch videotaped footage of the medal awards, and to evaluate the delight of the three medallists. The students observed bronze medallists to be more contented than silver medallists, although the latter had obviously performed better.

The explanation for this was that the emotional responses of the medallists were driven by comparisons with the most easily imagined alternative result. For silver medallists that result was gold. For the bronze medallists that outcome was fourth place, and no medal. This seminal finding emphasises how

counterfactuals can influence emotions.

From a branding perspective, studies of medal winner effects have important implications for marketers. When one brand is chosen over another, especially in the case of durable products (such as a car), or in the case of a high involvement service (such as a holiday) it is very likely that consumers make comparisons with the most easily imagined alternative. The effects may be even stronger when the first choice is unavailable, and the consumer is forced to accept the next available alternative (for example, when a car model is out of stock, or when a preferred holiday venue is fully booked). The consequences for issues such as word-of-mouth brand communication, consumer expectations and satisfaction and perceptions of brand and organisation personality could be extremely important.

REPUTATION, IDENTITY AND IMAGE

It is useful to put the role of positioning

- When one brand is chosen over another, especially in the case of durable products (such as a car), or in the case of a high involvement service (such as a holiday) it is very likely that consumers make comparisons with the most easily imagined alternative.
- Two main sources of brand differentiation can be noted; one that emphasises intra-brand differences and another that highlights inter-brand differences.
- It has been held that just as human beings have personalities, so do brands and this increasing anthropomorphization of brands has been recognised in the marketing literature.
- In simple terms, what probably is most important for a brand is to be well positioned in the mind of the market.

and brand and organisation personality in the wider context of brand reputation and brand identity and to understand how positioning and personality interact in this wider context. Corporate reputation has been variously addressed in different disciplines. In marketing, it is founded on the general premise that it involves a general estimation which the public makes of an organisation. Its main outcome is the longer term disposition that the particular stakeholder develops toward an entity, with all that implies. Behind brand reputation lies brand identity. Brand or corporate identity can be thought of as 'self-presentation' in terms of the managed cues or signals that are offered about the brand to stakeholders. The transmitted identity is received by stakeholders as image. It is a favourable brand or corporate image or set of images that contributes to a positive brand or corporate reputation.

BRAND AND ORGANISATION PERSONALITY

Differentiation of an offering with a particular target group is one of the key activities pursued when positioning a product in the market. Two main sources of brand differentiation can be noted; one that emphasises intra-brand differences and another that highlights inter-brand differences. The former focuses on differences within brands while the latter is about differences between brands.

Within brand differences focus on the view of different stakeholders with respect to the same brand and are often captured by terms like brand or corporate reputation. Diverse measures that often include various ranking procedures have been used to capture reputation. ▶



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On the other hand, between brand differences seek to distinguish the brand from other brands often among customers. These activities are easy to observe in the numerous attempts at customisation by various brands in different markets. For example in banking, HSBC describes itself as ‘the world’s local

bank’ while UBS uses ‘you and us’. In automobiles Honda describes itself as ‘the power of dreams’ while Toyota emphasises that one should ‘get the feeling’. Such activities represent attempts at differentiation using personalisation of institutions and products, in ways that seek to attribute human motivation,

characteristics, or behaviour to brands. It has been held that just as human beings have personalities, so do brands and this increasing anthropomorphization of brands has been recognised in the marketing literature.

Brand and organisation personality are essential for a number of reasons. Given the importance of the symbolic meaning of brands, customers are as much attracted to the personalities of brands and organisations as to the goods or services behind them. In addition brand and organisation personality provides marketers with “something to say” in their marketing communications thereby helping to offer a basis on which to build a communications campaign. Just like a person’s personality enables the individual to stand out from the crowd, in the case of brands and organisations, salient personality dimensions enable the marketer to ‘position’ the offering.

Finally, the brands and organisations that customers patronise are often an expression of their own personality in that they use brands to make statements about themselves. Therefore brands and the unique personalities that are created by marketers in the form of branded offerings, give the customer something to say ▶



about themselves.

If one draws a parallel to human personality where individuals exhibit certain traits more than others and these in turn contribute to distinguish one person from another, the dimensions of brand and organisation personality will similarly not be equally salient. For example the brand personality of Land Rover emphasises the dimensions of 'Ruggedness' and 'Excitement', associating, as it does, with the harsh outdoors and highlighting its uptake as a popular vehicle with the military of various countries. Similarly the brand or organisation personality of an entity like the Red Cross does not emphasise the dimensions of 'Thrill' or 'Style' but would rather focus on the 'Boy Scout' aspect. The positioning being sought for a brand needs to determine which aspects of brand personality and organisation personality are highlighted. However, even if no clear positioning is being pursued the brand or organisation will still have a personality. The question then is 'Does the brand or organisation have the desired personality?'

Results from a number of experimental research activities using high involvement offerings that my colleagues and I have

undertaken has repeatedly shown that, despite the high ranking of a particular brand in its category, it is perceived by its own customers as having a similar personality profile to a lower ranked brand. Moreover, given a choice, a majority of customers of a middle ranked brand would rather have bought the top brand. It therefore appears that even though a brand is doing a good job in terms of being well-ranked, its customers do not perceive its brand or organisation personality very highly, and given the choice, would have preferred to go elsewhere.

IMPLICATIONS

These results emphasise the point that it is simply not enough to be ranked highly. It appears that organisation and brand personality rather than reputation in terms of ranking is more strongly related to brand preference among customers. Many of the elements believed by brands to be important, and pursued by them to obtain and sustain a high ranking may be less salient than the need to have and sustain a clear and desired brand or organisation personality. In simple terms, what probably is most important for a brand is to be well positioned in the mind of the market.

The results highlight the need for and the importance of managing brand and organisation personality, and that this personality is important in the positioning of a brand. There is a very real need to understand a current brand or organisation personality and the brand or organisation personality of competitors. This will allow for the identification of salient personality elements that can be exploited to help position the brand away from competitors and along dimensions desired by customers.

The findings illustrate the challenge faced by marketing managers when silver medal effects occur. The issue is important and quite prevalent. For example, a customer buys a VW Touareg although they may really have wanted but could not afford a Porsche Cayenne, whereas the customer who bought a Hyundai Santa Fe is quite happy and in fact pleasantly surprised. The main issue that these results seek to make really revolves around the need for careful positioning and management. ■

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