



Brand Personality: A Basis for Positioning

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The important role that branding and its symbolic meaning play in marketing exchange is not in dispute. The search by advertising practitioners to capture and effectively communicate the symbolic meaning of brands is ongoing. Concurrently, among academics the role of the symbolic meaning of brands has been emphasised by post-modern scholars who underline this view as an alternative to the traditional view that envisages products as simply bundles of functional attributes.

Brands are one of the key elements that contribute significantly to product augmentation. For sellers, brands perform the function of 'facilitation'. This is achieved via a coherent message to a target customer group that enables the identification and re-identification of products that in turn facilitate repeat purchases and ultimately brand loyalty. Brands also facilitate the introduction of new products as customers are generally more willing to try a new product if it carries the same familiar brand. In addition, a brand facilitates promotional efforts by providing the firm with a name on which to focus, creating a basis for differentiation that moves the product away from being a commodity and provides an opportunity for premium pricing. On the other side of the exchange process, for buyers, brands effectively perform a function of 'reduction'. Brands allow buyers to reduce search costs and provide an assurance of quality that can subsequently be extended

to new products introductions that offer buyers a reduction in the perceived risk of new purchases. In addition brands can provide buyers with status and prestige, thereby reducing the social and psychological risks associated with owning and using the 'wrong' product. In essence a brand offers a basis of distinction for both parties in the exchange process. The critical question revolves around what distinctions in effect make a difference.

Customers are living in an over-communicated society and are not exactly waiting with baited breath for the offer message emanating from firms. Simply put, there is an over-congestion of brands out there in the market and a firm's message needs to make it through the noise to register. Indeed the mind has been likened to a dripping sponge. As one drops more water onto it most of the water just drops out. The challenge for the marketer is to make his drop stick.

This is the role of positioning. A marketer seeks to provide a product offer with a clear identity or image, so that consumers will perceive the product as having some distinctive features or benefits relative to competing offerings. Take Fairy Liquid, a brand of liquid dishwashing detergent - not exactly the most exciting of products but globally a multi-million Euro market. What does it stand for? Quite simply - 'Gentle on hands'. Now making liquid detergent is not rocket science but its marketing undoubtedly goes beyond chemistry. By positioning it as 'gentle on hands' the

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marketer is carving a unique niche in customers' minds that is distinct from that of all other liquid detergents. A competitor that tries to adopt the same position is a 'me too' to the consumer and faces an uphill struggle. Look at the massive effort by Pepsi against Coca Cola. Cola is Coke which we are told is 'the real thing'. Although a 'me too' positioning is not desirable, it remains for the marketer to find an alternative positioning. It is possible to compete in the same market on say a cheap price positioning. However, you are unlikely to occupy this position on your own and not surprisingly, margins will not be great. The marketer needs to find another position - that drop of water that will stick in the dripping sponge and that makes the offering unique.

Just as human beings have unique personalities, brands also can be said to have personalities. The brand personality concept was first developed by Jennifer Aaker, Professor at the Graduate School of Business, Stanford University, who makes use of the 'Big five' human personality factors of Extroversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Emotional Stability and Openness to develop a measure of brand personality that envisages and captures a concept consisting of five dimensions where three: Sincerity, Excitement and Competence mirror the 'Big five' factors while adding a further two: Sophistication and Ruggedness. The measure provides a useful psychometric instrument that has been used to understand and access different products, in various markets across different countries.

It has been argued that the differentiation of an offering to 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 emphasised. There are differences that focus on distinctions among brands and others that focus on differences within brands. Differences within brands focus on the view of different

stakeholders with respect to the same brand and are often captured by terms like brand or corporate reputation.

When the focus is on differences among brands one can observe the increased attempts at customisation being undertaken by various brands in different industries. For example HSBC, a major financial institution 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 'get the feeling'. Such activities represent attempts at personalisation of institutions and products that generally often seek to attribute human motivation, characteristics, or behaviour to brands.

This increasing anthropomorphisation of brands has been recognised in the academic and popular marketing literature. Brand personality is essentially that set of human characteristics associated with a brand. As has been noted, this concept has been operationalised by Professor Aaker to provide a psychometrically sound measure that consists of five dimensions that have been termed: Sincerity - Domestic, honest, genuine, cheerful; Excitement - Daring, spirited, imaginative, up-to-date; Competence - Reliable, responsible, dependable, efficient; Sophistication - Glamorous, presentation, charming, romantic; and, Ruggedness - Tough, strong, outdoorsy, rugged. The conceptualisation used and the instrument developed are not without its critics. Exception to the inclusion of certain items that relate to gender, social class and age in the instrument have been made while others have argued for the non inclusion of certain adjectives, terms like 'western' and 'small town'. It has also been argued that the conceptualisation is 'too wide' embracing concepts that go beyond those of brand personality. Notwithstanding, in work undertaken with colleagues, we have successfully extended the application of the brand personality concept and measure beyond business to university brands.

In understanding brand personality one



can draw a parallel to human personality where individuals exhibit certain traits more than others that in turn contribute to distinguish one person from another. The dimensions of brand personality are similarly not equally salient and enable the projection of different brand personalities. For example, a brand like Land Rover emphasises the dimensions of ruggedness and excitement of its brand personality, 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 personality of the Red Cross does not emphasise the dimensions of ruggedness and excitement but rather focuses on sincerity and competence. The positioning being sought for a brand needs to determine which aspects of brand personality are highlighted. However, even if no clear positioning is being pursued the brand will still have a personality. The question then is: does the brand have the desired personality?

Brand personality is important for a number of reasons. Given the importance of the symbolic meaning of brands, customers are as much attracted to the personalities of brands as to the goods or services behind them. In addition brand personality provides marketers with 'something to say' in their marketing communication thereby helping to offer a basis on which to build a memorable communications campaign. Just like a person's personality enables him/her to stand out from the crowd, in the case of brands salient brand

personality dimensions enable the marketer to position the offering. Moreover, the brands customers use 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, provide customers with something to say about themselves.

There is a strong argument for the management of brand personality among the product portfolio of businesses. There is first a need to understand the current

brand personality of the business and its competitors. The standard instrument to measure brand personality is often a good starting point. This will in turn allow for the identification of salient brand personality elements that can be exploited to help position the business or organisation away from competitors and along dimensions desired by customers. In addition, the ten item brand report card provided by Professor Kevin Lane Keller provides a useful checklist that allows management to systematically think about how to grade the brand and to ask whether: (1) The brand excels at delivering the benefits customers really desire; (2) The brand is remaining relevant; (3) The pricing strategy is based on customers' perceptions of value; (4) The brand is properly positioned; (5) The brand is consistent; (6) The brand portfolio and hierarchy make sense; (7) All marketing activities are coordinated and used to build equity; (8) The brand's managers understand what the brand means to customers; (9) The brand is given proper support, and that support is sustained over the long run, and; (10) The organisation monitors sources of brand equity.

Should you as a manager be asking some of these questions about your brands? What personality does your brand communicate? Does this personality help or detract in effectively positioning your brand in the market? ■

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