Siddhant
Volume 15, Issue 1, January-March, 2015, pp- 47-54

DOI: 10.5958/2231-0657.2015.00005.1

Brand Identity – Visual and Verbal Expression of Brand

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ABSTRACT

A brand identity is an outward expression of the brand, including its name and visual appearance. The brand's identity is its fundamental means of consumer recognition and symbolises the brand's differentiation form competitors. It is important to note that a brand identity refers to the strategic goal for a brand, while the brand image is what currently resides in the minds of consumers. How should a brand and marketing manager develop a set of successful brand identities? This paper ties together several extant researches in this area and provides a comprehensive framework in terms of guidelines for creating and building successful brand identities. A successful brand has high awareness, depicts a desirable and unique image, gets easy recognition and is highly trusted by customers. The first critical step to achieve this level of success with the customer is to have an excellent brand identity However, the extant literature does not provide any research that brings all the elements together to provide an overall understanding of what brand identity is, and what steps are required for establishing a powerful set of brand identities. Therefore, the objective of this paper is to assist a marketing manager understand the various elements associated with brand identities and suggest a framework to help a company establish its brand identity for successful branding.

KEYWORDS: Brand identity, Brand awareness, Brand image, Perceived quality, Brand equity, Brand loyalty, Brand name

INTRODUCTION

The visible elements of a brand such as colour, logo, design, name and symbol that together identify and distinguish the brand in consumer's mind is brand identity. The identity of a brand originates from the company that is responsible for creating a differentiated product with unique features. This is how a company seeks to identify itself. In today's marketplace brands are seen everywhere, and the ones that succeed are the brands that are trusted and easily recognisable by customers. For example, Coca Cola, the world leader in Cola drinks, has been able to maintain its strong presence in the soft drinks market because the trademarks Coke and Coca Cola denote values that go beyond mere physical attributes and product labelling. For this communication strategy to be successful, companies have used a strong brand identity as foundation with differentiated products that have high awareness and a good image perception in the minds of the consumer. The perceived knowledge about the brand in the mind of the customer along with the trust placed on the brand sums up what brands and brand equity develop through a powerful brand identity.

The marketing mix strategy plays an important role in establishing a brand identity. For example, the tangible attributes that comprise the product will send a message to the consumer about the various features of the brand. The dual air bags and anti-lock braking system installed in a particular brand of car communicate to potential buyers the safety benefits inherent in buying the car. The warehouse like ambience of Metro retail chain stores and the emphasis on self-service are signals to

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the consumer that the company competes on the basis of low cost. Therefore, though band identities, companies seek to convey their individuality and distinctiveness to all the consumers and other stakeholders.

ESTABLISHING NEW BRAND IDENTITY

Most companies have a tendency to name new products/services/offerings with a new unique and proprietary name. Over time, this approach creates a proliferation of names that can easily result in a catalogue of proprietary names. These names become increasingly difficult to manage in the marketplace.

While establishing a new brand identity or name, executives should consider the several arguments and make the determination based on whether there is overwhelming need for a new name. The decision makers should consider the following questions before deciding upon the need for a new name:

- Is there an existing brand name in the corporate portfolio that can stretch to cover appropriately the new offering?
- If there is no existing brand that is stretchable, will a new name allow entry into a market that the firm does not have permission to enter?
- Will new name cause confusion in the marketplace?
- Is there adequate executive support for a new name?
- Is there enough money in the budget to develop market and protect a new brand name?
- Is the new offering strategically important to drive purchasing?

There is an undeniable natural inclination to think that new things require new names, but threat is not always the case. In fact, the 'rush to name' is one of the biggest contributors to a much greater corporate brand problem – an unruly brand portfolio. Too often, brand managers' zeal to launch new brands leads them too quickly to decide in favour of new names before they carefully consider whether the new offering would be better off marketed under the name of an established brand already in the corporate portfolio. For example, the entry of Adidas into the men's deodorant category was an extension from athletic wear to a personal hygiene. This was a stretch for a brand where sweat is a part of the game. However, Adidas recognised that its high awareness and high brand rank among men was relevant. They made the right choice in sticking with the Adidas name rather than coming up with a new name, which Adidas can endorse. The decision to market under the Adidas name gave the new brand immediate credentials and maximum push to both the retailer and the customer. On the other hand, Toyota's decision to enter in the luxury brand with a new name 'Lexus' was an instant hit and provided huge returns for Toyota's decision. Therefore, it is very important for decision makers to make the case for a new brand name or identity before deciding upon it.

THE INHIBITING EFFECT OF BRAND NAME MEANING

The choice of a brand name is an important means to build equity (Aaker, 1991). According to memory network theory, the brand name can strengthen the association between the brand and benefits implied by the name (e.g., Diehard, Lean Cuisine, Newsweek) because each time the brand name is recalled the de factor benefits implied by the brand name is also practiced (Keller *et al.*, 1998; Keller *et al.*, 2002). In addition, brands with names that imply a benefit may inhibit consumer's ability to retain benefit information unrelated to the benefit implied by the brand name. Essentially, a meaningful brand name reinforces the link between the brand and the benefit the name implies at the expense of benefits that the name does not imply. The strength of association between the brand name and the benefit implied by the brand name becomes so strong that it inhibits the process of spreading activation to other nodes in the memory network. This phenomenon is known as output interferences. For example, the name Sunlit for a brand of laundry may reinforce the benefits 'gets clothes bright', but may inhibit the ability of consumers to learn specific information about other brand benefits (e.g., stain removal properties, gentle on fabrics, etc.).

Therefore as a general guideline, it is better to select brand names or identities that are neutral in associated benefits of the brand name when a product has multiple benefits. However, a product with a single large benefit is recommended to have a brand that has a high suggestive meaning associated with the brand name.

ROLE OF IMAGERY ON BRAND IDENTITY

Often, pictures are better remembered than words. This has been proved by research in both psychology (Paivio, 1969) and marketing (Adidam, 1995, Alesandrini, 1983, Gardner and Houston, 1986). Paivio (1986) expanded this further to arrive at the picture superiority effect through the dual coding theory. This theory presented the role of imagery in associative learning. Imagery is the visual/non-verbal memory representations of concrete objects and events or non-verbal modes of thought in which individuals actively generate and manipulate such representations. The verbal and visual systems are functionally independent where one system can be active without the other or both can be active in parallel. Summarising dual coding theory, Paivio has presented a dual coding hypothesis, which suggests that a concrete word (e.g., EDGE, MUSTANG) would be likely to generate both verbal and visual memory codes, while an abstract word (e.g., CREST, FINESSE) would be less likely to generate a visual code. Hence, this idea is an important input for selecting a brand name.

Adidam (1995) used the dual coding theory and found that a 'high imagery' brand name would store a stronger brand – product association in the memory node than 'low imagery' brand name. Also, a brand logo plays an important role in enhancing brand awareness of the product. In this research study, he concluded the following:

1. Brand names with high imagery and high fittingness level would tend to have very high brand recall and recognition, and are candidates for top of mind awareness.
2. Brand names having low imagery, but complemented by a very strong fittingness level would tend to have higher brand recall than brand recognition.
3. Brand names having low association, but complemented by a very high imagery would tend to have higher brand recognition than brand recall.
4. An associative logo would tend to enhance brand awareness more than a non-associated logo.
5. A character/pictorial logo would enhance brand awareness more than an abstract logo.

The main implications are that the various brand identities must be mutually reinforcing so that they can interactively enhance brand awareness, and in turn would enhance brand equity.

EFFECTS OF BRAND NAME EXPOSURE

Advertisers spend billions of dollars annually on advertising programmes that do little more than reinforce the brand name. Simple brand name exposure benefits the brands largely. Brand name imprinting is a function of brand name exposure. Brand name imprinting is the process of creating and strengthening the brand name node in the brand memory network through brand name exposure. Brand name imprinting at a time prior to the presentation of specific brand information will improve the retention of the information by strengthening the association between the brand name and brand information. Baker (2003) conducted a research and proposed that brand names with neutral meaning are likely to succeed more as they do not carry perceptual baggage that can interfere with the creation of new associations of brand name with information.

Brand Name Salience

It is typically defined as brand familiarity through measures such as recognised speed and order of recall. Brands with high brand name salience are recognised and recalled more quickly than other brands. All things equal, a brand that is recognised more quickly than other brands on a store shelf is more likely to be purchased. Brand name salience most likely influences purchases in product categories characterised by little differentiation (Baker and Lutz, 2000). In other product categories, it is likely to influence brand consideration directly, but has less impact on brand choice.

Brand Name Habituation

An individual's attitude towards an object is directly proportional to the number of times the individual is exposed to that object. Known as the mere exposure effect, it is robust across a range of attitude objects, exposure environments and delay intervals (Bornstein, 1989). More recently, mere exposure of the brand name has shown to influence brand choice behaviour when consumers perceive brand alternatives to be similar, or when they are not motivated to search for brand differences (Baker, 1999). Although brand name habituation's effect on purchase behaviour may be similar to that of brand name salience, the process is far different. Brand name salience is a conscious, explicit effect of brand name familiarity, one cause of which is brand name exposure. The mere exposure effect is an automatic effect of brand name exposure that is not mediated by subjective perceptions of brand name familiarity (Bornstein, 1989). It is now widely accepted that the mere exposure effect is mediated by an unconscious habituation response. That is, the more often an object (brand) is seen, the less threatening it becomes. As its threat diminishes, it becomes more approachable and likeable. That habituation effect is not mediated by subjective perceptions of brand name familiarity, nor does it require conscious recognition of any prior exposure to the brand name. This is a key distinction between this and brand name salience effects.

Brand Name Imprinting

According to memory network theory, knowledge is an association of nodes and links. Nodes are stored concept of information. Links connect and relate these nodes to one another (Anderson, 1983; Bargh, 1984). The hub of a brand memory network is the brand name node. For example, brand information nodes on the brand name McDonald's memory network may include the associated brand information such as 'hamburger', 'fries', 'convenient', and so forth. The retrieval of brand information nodes linked to the brand name node. Brand names imprinted and re-imprinted on an ongoing basis should enable the formation of stronger linkage associated to the band name. Contrarily, insufficient brand name imprinting may not only weaken brand information retention, it may also trigger a cycle of inefficient learning that is difficult to correct.

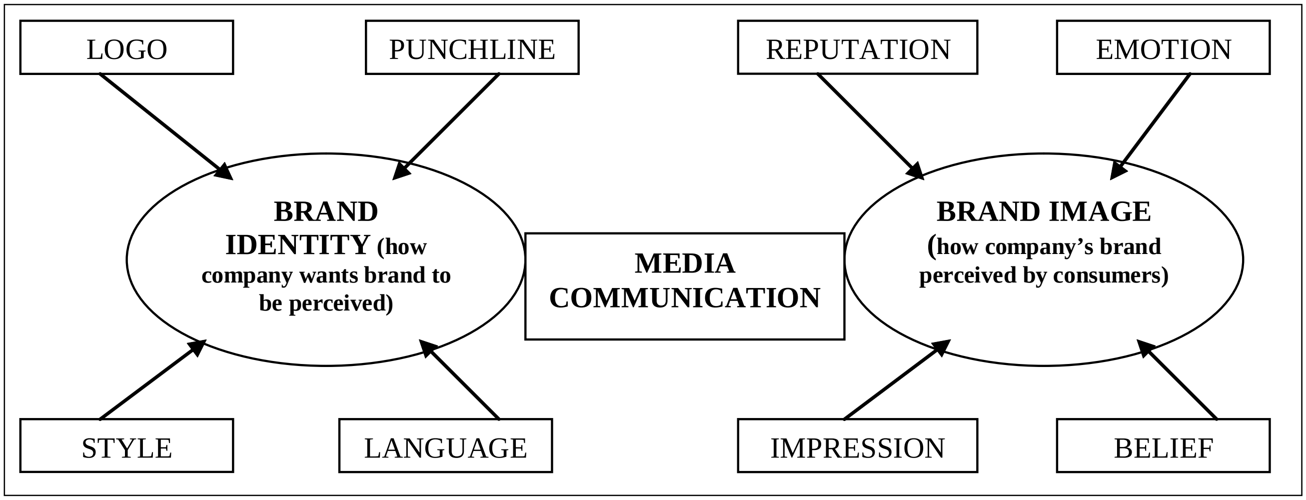
BRAND IDENTITY VS BRAND IMAGE

From a communications perspective, the key difference between brand identity and brand image is that the company drives brand identity while customer's perception on the brand is the brand image. Brand message is packaged or wrapped in terms of brand identity, and it is unpackaged or unwrapped by the consumer in the form of brand image. Identity represents the firm's reality, while the image represents the perception of the consumer.

Brand identity and brand image are products of the communications environment in which they exist. Brand loyalty can be created and maintained by strengthening identity – image linkage. In other words, the gap between company realty and consumer perception has to be minimised or eliminated. Creation of values for the firm and the consumers occur only when the consumer understands and appreciates the brand message. The brand also has to address consumer needs better than the competition. In an over-communicated marketing environment, it is very easy for brand identity and brand image to be out of sync. When this happens, consumers will move on by ignoring the brand. Attributes, benefits and attitudes of product reflected in brand associations leads to high congruence and leverage in the minds of the consumers towards brand identity (Keller, 1993).

NEED FOR POWERFUL BRAND IDENTITY FOR SUPERIOR PERFORMANCE

The job of establishing a brand identity does not stop after choosing a good name and associating it with a



suitable imagery. The company has to increase its awareness to translate the names and imagery into market and financial performance (Barwise *et al*., 1989). This section of the paper explains to a marketing manager how a powerful brand identity leads to strong financial performance for the company and the superior value for the customer.

Robertson (1987) says that the most important strategic decision facing the marketing manager during launch of a new product is in choosing not just an appropriate brand name, but to select a good set of brand identities. While several activities are required to build a valuable brand, the starting point of this brand building strategy requires establishing a powerful set of brand identities as the foundation.

According to Yoo *et al*. (2000) and Baldauf *et al.* (2003), brand equity established through brand identity leads to the superior value to the customer and the firm. The major focus of their research was to explore the brand building efforts and the resulting effect on the dimensions of brand equity. They investigated the effects of price, store image, distribution intensity, advertising spending and price deals on three particular dimensions of brand equity – perceived quality, brand loyalty and brand awareness. Further, Yoo *et al*. (2000) proposed that the three brand equity dimensions are antecedents to brand profitability and brand sales volume. Thus, a powerful set of brand identities is a must to have good brand awareness, perceived quality and brand loyalty, thereby proving the need for a powerful brand identity to result in superior financial performance.

Brand Awareness

This is the ability for a buyer to recognise or recall that a brand is a member of a certain product category (Aaker, 1991). Brand awareness influences the selection of products amongst a variety of choices for the customer. As brand awareness increases, customers purchase more of the product, which then results into more profits and market performance for the firm. The value seen by the customer in the product increases as they purchase more of the product due to brand awareness.

Perceived Quality

This is another dimension of brand value that compels a consumer to select a product or service. Product quality is a firm's essential resource for achieving competitive advantage. Perceived quality is defined as the consumer's judgment about a product's overall excellence or superiority with reference to substitutes. If a firm can continuously enhance the perceived quality within the minds of consumers, the result of this effort will directly translate into profits for the firm.

Brand Loyalty

A deeply held commitment for repeated purchase of a preferred product or service consistently is called as brand loyalty. An important characteristic of loyal customers is that they consistently favour a brand and refrain from switching to other brands. The first two dimensions of brand equity make the customer purchase the product initially. However, brand loyalty is what causes the customer to have repeated purchase, and thereby constantly increase the profitability and market performance of the firm.

To summarise, the three dimensions of brand equity (brand awareness, perceived quality and brand loyalty) are directly proportional to the results (profitability, market performance and customer value). However, a firm needs a distinct and powerful brand identity as a foundation for establishing these brand equity dimensions (brand awareness, perceived quality and brand loyalty). Therefore, it can be derived that a powerful brand identity is the foundation for a firm's sustained profitability and success.

INITIATIVES TO ESTABLISH A POWERFUL SET OF BRAND IDENTITIES

Brand identity originates from the identity of the company, which creates a differentiated product with appropriate positioning. In other words, the four Ps – product, pricing, promotion and place – are very important and plays a major part in establish a brand. Therefore, following initiatives help in establishing powerful brand identities:

- The four Ps – product, pricing, promotion and place – are the fundamental requirements for any marketing success, which could be aided well by having a powerful set of brand identities.
- When deciding upon the brand name, make a decision on using an existing brand name or create a new one. This decision depends on the differentiation and positioning strategies, financial strength to support the new brand name, and the offerings from other brands within the same company.
- Select brand names that are neutral in associated benefits and less suggestive when a product has multiple benefits. However, if a product has a single large benefit, it is recommended to have a brand name that has a high suggestive meaning.
- When choosing a brand name, choosing letters that make up a brand name creates a personality or image perception amongst consumers.
- A brand name with an associated logo/imagery tends to enhance brand awareness more than a non-associated logo. In addition, a brand name with high imagery and high fittingness level would help in high brand recognition and recall.
- Influence customer's purchase decision by exposing and imprinting the brand identity in the consumer's mind through multiple communication strategies.
- Form strategies to bridge the gap between the communicated brand identity and perceived brand image in the minds of the consumer.

CONCLUSION

However, it has been difficult for brand and marketing managers wanting to have a big picture on all the elements that lead to developing a good brand identity. Therefore, the goal behind this research paper was to tie all the good ideas presented about brand identities from different research studies into one synopsis paper that would elucidate the elements that create a good brand identity, and expand further to provide a guideline for brand and marketing managers to establish a powerful set of brand identities for successful branding. The first important decision for a brand manager is whether to develop a new brand name or to extend an existing brand for launching new products. If a new name is required for a product or service that has single large benefit, we recommend that the name needs to be highly suggestive about the benefits offered by the brand. On the other hand, if the brand offers multiple benefits, we recommend that the name be less suggestive and more neutral. A brand name with a highly complementing imagery has more potential to be successful. The process of establishing a successful rand does not stop at choosing a brand name and imagery. Brand awareness has to be increased in order to establish brand identities in the marketplace, and this could translate into better financial performance for the company. Brand awareness could be increased using multiple communication strategies to imprint the name, logo and benefits offered by the brand in the minds of the customers. While enhancing the brand awareness, a gap could be formed about what the company tries to communicate through its marketing strategy and what customers perceive about the brand. The company has to take all efforts to bridge this gap. It is in this stage that the company has to combine all its resources effectively to establish the four Ps to arrive at the right marketing mix. This effort from the company could potentially establish a good brand that comprises a powerful set of brand identities as its foundation.

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