Building a Brand: A Social Interaction Perspective

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Abstract

There is a proliferation of brands in the country. Companies after companies are launching products, trying to build them into brands, some succeeding, and some coming up short. It is a topic of hot discussion in all academic and even industrial circles. But there is still a gap when it comes to the proper understanding of the term brand as well as brand building. Different people perceive it in different ways. Consequently what are all the steps which forms the process of brand building still remains under debate. In this article we go through different literature to discuss what exactly is meant by branding and also the different stages of the brand building process based on a social interaction perspective.

Keywords: Marketing, Brand Building, Advertising, Social Interaction

Introduction

Brand building is a much debated topic. But many are still unsure as to exactly what are the different stages of this process, especially when it comes to practice. Most of this uncertainty can be ascribed to two factors. The first one is that not all are clear as to what exactly is a brand. As Kapferer (2004) puts it, each expert comes up with his or her own definition of brand or nuances of definition. The second reason is that this process - like most effects of communication - is something that happens in the mind of the target audience and hence is likely to be intangible and difficult to measure. This paper takes up the former factor first.

Brand: Definitions

A brand has been defined in a number of ways. The origin of the word can be seen from the definition "To burn a distinctive mark into or upon with a hot iron, to indicate quality, ownership, etc., or to mark as infamous (as a convict)." (Webster's 1913 Dictionary). Ancient Mesopotamian and Greek cultures made considerable use of symbols and names to identify or designate their offerings, which were mostly ointments, pots, wines, or metals. (Sarkar and Singh, 2005). In the US, cattle used to be similarly marked so that it could be distinguished from other people's herds if it became mixed up. (Ward, 2003). The oldest generic brand in continuous use in India is the herbal medicine known as Chyawanprash, which is consumed for its alleged health benefits and credited to the revered Rishi (seer) named Chyawan (Mahabharata).

Brand as a Mark

It has another clear, well-known, established definition: "a name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers" (Bennett 1988). This definition is the official one of the American Marketing Association (2007) and is found in virtually every leading introductory marketing textbook (Kotler et al, 2005, McCarthy et al 1984, Schoell et al 1992, Aaker, 1991) with minor variations.

But there is a problem with such definitions. It only reaches up to a certain extent and no further. These describe the brand as an identity and even as a legal instrument. Brand is a legal statement of ownership (Crainer, 1985). Oxford dictionary (2009) has defined brand as "a particular sort or class of goods, as indicated by the trade mark on them". An identity system aids as a memory shortcut and reduces risk. Developing an identity not only differentiates and protects against competitors, but also enables a firm to gain economic advantage (Fomburn and Shanly, 1990).

If the above definitions are the ultimate then why are those products that are sold at the roadside pavements and the local Mandis or Sandhais called unbranded products? Examined closely these sometimes have beautiful packaging, with names like Pepsi Baniyans or Reliance Watches. Many of them have logo units, mascots and other identity elements that will make a seasoned graphic designer proud. These products can be easily identified and differentiated from the others of the same ilk. So there is more to a brand than those factors mentioned above.

Brand as an Image

The brand alternatively has been defined as an image in the consumer's mind (Martineau, 1959). This image includes both its functional and psychological attributes. Further the brand image is explained as everything people associate with a brand (Newman, 1957). Another way to define a brand is that a brand is a consumer's idea of a product (Pitcher, 1985).

Brand as a Personality

Many researchers have defined brand as a symbolic personality that users value beyond functional utility (Blackston, 1992; Arnold, 1992; Goodyear, 1993). While choosing among competing brands, consumers assess the fit between the personalities (perceived) of the brands and the personality they wish to project (Zinkhan et al.,1996), maybe consciously or subconsciously. Personality and values are inter-related (Gutman,1982), with personality being a sub part of value sets. Brand personality could primarily be the net result of the firm's communication, whilst image is the way consumers perceive the brands personality (Plummer, 1985). Personality is a prerequisite for a relationship between consumers and brands (Duboff, 1986; Woodward, 1991).

Brand as Relationships

A brand relationship is a logical extension of the brand personality (Blackston, 1992) with the consumers having a relationship with them if a brand can be personified. (Kapferer, 1992). Consumers' decisions are influenced by personal and cultural values (Franzen et al., 2008). Clark (1987) remarks consumers find value in the brand, in its heritage, in their personal experience with it and how it reflects what the individual stands for. Sheth et al. (1991) define brands as value systems. In sum, building a brand implies something intangible in the mental sphere. And hence more nebulous.

Brand as a Composite

Summarizing the above definitions a brand 'is the feelings, images or ideas that come to mind on seeing or hearing the name, term, sign or symbol which identifies a seller's good or service as different from those of competition.' It is the emotional pay-off. The motivational button that catalyses the brand decision in the user's heart and mind. In the earlier definition AVT is the brand, as different from Brooke Bond or Tata Tea but in this definition it also includes the perception of strength and consistent taste of the tea, the pictures of the rolling tea estates of Kerala, the white colour pouch pack of AVT Premium, the Shop Boards with the AVT name across South India, all images, cues or feelings that come to mind in association with the name AVT.

Brand Building

Considering the above definition of the brand how can a brand be built? What are the steps in brand building? There are different approaches towards brand building. According to Kapferer, (1998, p. 46 (7), branding building is a holistic process. Giving a product or service a name and indicating to the outside world that it has been inscribed with an organization's logo and identity do not constitute branding. The deliberate strategy of market segmentation and product differentiation forms the basis of brands. Aaker (2002) enumerates a six step process of brand building. According to him exposure to different promotion first creates an awareness about the brand. Next the consumer acquires knowledge about the brand attributes and benefits. This in turn develops a perception of the brand, which later converts to emotion and feelings towards the brand. Linking with peers and group norms follows, and further by another reminder or incentive for brand trial.

Social Interaction Perspective

In this paper we look at brand building based on a social interaction perspective. So what is social interaction theory? Social interaction theory is concerned about how people interact in social settings. This theory emphasizes the importance of face-to-face interactions and the role of symbols, language, and gestures in shaping human behavior and society (Mead, 1934). This knowledge of social interaction can be crucial when communicating with your potential or current customers. And further branding. This theory can be applied to any social network, not just social media—any platform that connects people.

From the literature it was found that the brand building process based on the social interaction perspective could be summarized into three important stages.

Stage 1 Creating a Recognition

A product can be a physical good, service, place, institution, person or idea as per Kotler (2005). These in turn can also become brands. So a person like Amitabh Bachan or Narayana Murthy can be built up into a brand just like a product or service based brand. Conversely how a brand is built imitates the way social relationships develop. How does social relationships develop?

The first and may be the only thing someone does when he or she meets somebody for the first time and get introduced to that person is remember their name. Still he or she is able to identify the person at the next encounter. According to Levinger (1983) this phase in relationship development is called Acquaintanceship. However Knapp (1978) terms this initiating where individuals make their first impression on each other.

Similarly the first step in the brand building process is making people aware of the brand. This involves getting the people to remember the brand name then associate the name with the product. For this the choice of the name is very important. It has to be easy to pronounce and easy to remember. Research says a three syllable word is best on both counts. ITC is easier on the tongue and ear than Indian Tobacco Company. Ideally the word should have some connection with the product in terms of the features or the usage of the product. Good Knight and Snuggies are two examples that prove the point. But having something like tobacco in the name is restricting the option of launching products in entirely independent categories. If it is a word that is there in the dictionary there is nothing like it as there won't be any misunderstandings.

The logo unit and the letter style also goes a long way in the identification process. The logo or emblem is a symbol which denotes that particular brand or company. It should be simple and can represent something that the company stands for as that would give greater remembrance. The logo unit includes a particular font type or way in which the name is written along with the logo. The font type used will depend on the kind of product. It would usually be serious for a product like a bank, frivolous for products for kids or state-of-the-art for a beauty product. Should be unique but at the same time readable. Any and all communication should ideally use the same font, many companies go to the extent of keeping similar layouts and fonts.

The house colour like the red and blue of Pepsi makes the communication memorable and help the brand stand out in a crowd. Some companies use a mascot, like the Amul Baby which helps them establish a clear connect with their target audience. Once these which are called the identity factors are set all kinds of awareness media are used to communicate the same. With continuous bombardment from all quarters including POPs like posters, danglers, stickers and streamers and outdoor media like glow signs, shop boards, hoardings, wall paintings, bus shelters or on telephone poles this process doesn't take much time. Companies may use auto tops or the backs of buses also to create awareness. Mainline advertising in TV, newspapers and magazines is good at creating reach but not cost effective as there is usually a lot of spillover.   In the brand life cycle it starts from the introductory stage and extends a fair way into the growth stage as well.

Stage 2 Developing an Association

In a social situation after one or two meetings with a person you are able not only to identify him but differentiate him from another similar person or person with similar sounding name. According to Knapp (1978), experimenting is the second phase in the formation of a social relationship. The phase of experimentation is when people start talking about themselves in order to get to know one another. Details are collected from mutual friends and acquaintances as well as family members. Any published material about the person is also perused with interest.

In case of brand a customer comes in contact with it in many different ways. Each of these points of contact is called a touch point. Neslin et al (2006) defines touch points as a customer contact point or a medium through which the firm and the customer interact. Many of these are discrete encounters. A touch point need not create a reciprocal interaction as in a TV or press advertisement. They may not even get into contact directly as in word of mouth. A customer using a product and gaining or not gaining a satisfaction out of it is also an encounter that is a touch point.

Knapp (1978) goes on to say that during this phase, the participants explore and obtain a sense of the relationship as well as one another. In this phase, communication often takes the shape of small talk

while both parties look for areas of shared experience or interest. This is the build-up stage, according to Levinger (1983). At this point, the relationship genuinely starts to develop. People begin to trust one another and stop being strangers. As opposed to people from diverse backgrounds and distinct ambitions, those with similar interests and backgrounds tend to get along better. Each person starts imputing certain character and personality to the other.

Similarly each touch point adds up to certain images that you have of the brand. The baseline or tagline of the brand is a positioning statement. To stand out from the crowd the brand differentiates itself from others based on the product or some other features. This then is burned into the minds of the target audience as per Ries et al (1993). For example, while Dunlop has throughout been Dunlop and always ahead, MRF has been the tyre with muscle. These then become the core values of the brand in terms of usage, benefits or features associated with it. This also in turns produces some images, feelings and ideas in the minds of the consumers or target audience. And just like in the case of people start imputing personality to the brand.

Stage 3 Appearance of the Connect

The constant inundation with the same message from different touch points and the resultant imputing certain character to the brand result in feelings towards it, positive or negative. These feelings of the customer create brand liking and the much vaunted brand loyalty.
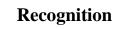
According to Levinger (1983), this marks the conclusion of the second stage of the relationship's growth or "build up stage." He asserts that this phase of a relationship is frequently characterised by two people being intimate, passionate, and feeling for each other. This stage is referred to as intensifying by Knapp (1978). The two people will carry out more experimentation at this stage to see if there is emotional attachment and affection shared by both. While this may be conscious or sub conscious in the case of people in the case of brands the development of the positive or negative feeling by the customer is more at the sub conscious or unconscious level.

They also bring certain ideas and images to the mind when you hear the particular name spoken. When you hear the name Tatas you immediately think of something credible, dignified, traditional, sober and gentlemanly while a Pepsi brings with it an image of youth, enthusiastic, but impertinent, slightly irrational and irresponsible. These in turn produces feelings of warmth and trust in one case and vigour and vitality in the other. These feelings give you an edge whenever the customer thinks about buying that particular product. Brand liking ensures that the customer will still think positively of the brand even when things go wrong once or twice.

Once the awareness, association and brand liking is established these have to be carefully maintained over the years. Any dissonance will result in confusion in the minds of the customer and affects the brand negatively.

Ramifications of the study

The model of brand building based on the stages can be simply outlined as below.

Recognition $\Longrightarrow$ **Associations** $\Longrightarrow$ **Connect**

This simple model should help the marketer with a simple architecture for building his brand. In case of big companies there are a number of people and resources whose main concern is building the brand. But in the case of smaller entities they have limited resources and either the marketing manager or the

owner himself has to take care of the branding among numerous other equally important and maybe more urgent matters. So if a checklist can be created out of this model with the activities at each stage delineated rather than mentioning abstract concepts and vague dos and don'ts it will be useful for the smaller organisations especially MSMEs who are strapped for fund, personnel and other resources.

Conclusion

Thus building a brand is a focused and integrated process that goes through three distinct stages although they are overlapping to some extent. It requires patience and determination to stick to the processes as well as come out with the same idea in your communication again and again. Always the tendency is there to do things in a different way, and deviate from the well-worn path, especially when it comes to the creative souls in the advertising agencies. But if it can be done it will be well worth the effort.

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