The Keys to Brand Success

Strong brands drive financial performance by ensuring that the most motivating brand associations influence purchase behavior. Multi-sensory cues ensure people recognize brands and respond positively. Knowing what makes your brand recognizable and triggers the most motivating impressions is critical to maximizing your brand’s full potential.

Brand relationships are the end result of all the contacts that consumers have with brands through physical experience, marketing communication, news, gossip or publicity. These combined experiences form brand associations that influence future purchase behavior. Selecting one brand over another will depend on the strength and quality of those associations, reflecting what an individual feels, knows, and thinks about a brand. The essential task of marketing is to create and strengthen the motivating brand associations that build and support market share.

WHICH KEY OPENS THE BRAND CUPBOARD

Our brains work by bringing together associations afresh each time we encounter a piece of stimulus, thereby giving us maximum flexibility in how we deal with threats and opportunities in our environments. This means that relatively small differences in the stimulus will create big differences in what comes to mind.

In his book *The Advertised Mind*, Erik du Plessis likened brand memories to items in a cupboard. When the door to one of our mental brand cupboards is opened the most prominent associations emerge first before the door swings shut. Only the most salient associations will affect our decisions unless we seek to retrieve other items.

If brand associations are going to influence a purchase decision, the most salient attributes need to be the ones that get through the cupboard door first. The main key to the cupboard is often the brand name — Nescafé, Walmart, Red Bull — whether that name is seen, heard, or thought of. For an uncomplicated brand with a highly distinctive name, like Facebook, little else may be needed to unlock brand associations. However, some categories, such as smoking cessation products and drain cleaners, include competing brands with similar sounding names. When a brand name is not obviously unique and distinctive, additional cues help to access the correct associations for a specific brand.

Additional cues will also be needed when the brand name is one that has been extended across a number of products. The brand key “Dove” will unlock something different than “Dove Shampoo” or “Dove Beauty Bars”. The key “Toyota” will access different memories than “Toyota Prius” and the key “Tesco” opens a different door than “Tesco Metro”. Managing such portfolios of brands is one of the most complex marketing tasks, and minimizing confusion is crucial for brand success. If associations with an umbrella brand are not clear and distinct in every context where the brand name appears, it will be harder for people to access the most relevant memories.
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Context also plays an important role. Brands are recalled in relation to a need, such as thirst. However, the brands and associations that are accessed may also differ depending on whether that thirst becomes a trigger in the context of a Saturday morning shopping trip or a Friday evening barbecue.

So do you know what makes your brand identifiable to consumers? How can you maximize the chances of recognition? If you are thinking about updating your brand’s packaging or logo, you need to be aware of the boundaries of your brand’s configurable identity. Should those boundaries be misunderstood or overstepped, you may well jeopardize assets that took years to create. In 2009, Tropicana dramatically changed their packaging in the US, resulting in a reported $30m loss of sales in the eight weeks before the original packaging was reinstated. And have you worked your way back from a moment of decision to your marketing activity to understand how the contexts and triggers play out along the path to purchase? Now is the time to do some thorough planning to maximise the success of your brand.

VISUAL CUES CAN BE CRUCIAL

Product design features such as logos and packaging can be just as important to brand recognition as the name. For example, Coca-Cola and Kellogg’s are associated with a distinctive script, and the logos of BMW and BP may be at least as powerful as the names themselves. The distinctive blue and yellow blocks of the Ikea logo would be identifiable without the name appearing at all.

Color is a distinct association for many brands: blue for IBM, red for The Economist, gold for Kodak, copper and black for Duracell. However, in grocery stores, the packaging of store brands can often copy the color schemes of the leading brands.

THE FACE OF THE BRAND

In reality, the process of unlocking brand associations is more complex than simply matching up brands with words, shapes, or colors. More important is the way all these elements work together. Jack Daniel’s is easily recognized on the bar shelf by its square bottle and distinctive black and white label. The design aesthetic of BMW is unlikely to be confused with that of Audi or Mercedes.

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