

# The Power of Being Meaningful, Different, and Salient

Members of the marketing community have long debated the secret to marketing success. Many practitioners assert that differentiation is the key factor. Others maintain that salience is uppermost during critical purchase moments, while a significant group believes that great marketing builds positive consumer sentiment by delivering on a meaningful brand promise.



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But we would suggest that this debate has been misguided. Drawing on learning from thousands of brand equity studies as well as a recent, groundbreaking pilot that linked neuroscience and survey data to consumer shopping behavior, we have established that financial success for brands depends on all three of these qualities. The ideal balance for a specific brand is a function of both the product category and the primary mode of financial return—sales volume or premium pricing.

## THREE QUALITIES, ALL IMPORTANT

Successful brands are meaningful, different, and salient. Each of these three elements comes with its own theory and history.

Difference (aka differentiation) has been widely adopted as a cornerstone of successful sales and marketing since the 1940s when Rosser Reeves introduced the term “Unique Selling Proposition” (USP) to the marketing lexicon. And yet, as true differentiation has become more and more difficult to achieve in increasingly commoditized markets, marketers have pursued alternate brand-building strategies. For example, in recent years, many marketers have embraced the idea that brands have to build relationships with consumers, so they have worked to make their brands meaningful, usually by improving product perceptions and strengthening emotional affinity. Other practitioners prefer to rely on salience. Though building brand awareness has always been accepted as a fundamental objective of brand marketing, there

is ongoing discussion over whether awareness is important simply as a precursor to brand equity, or if the concept of salience, which goes beyond basic awareness, is actually the most important driver of brand choice.



## THE PROOF: BRANDS, BRAINS, AND BEHAVIOR

### CHARACTERISTICS OF SUCCESSFUL BRANDS

The strongest brands don't rely only on being meaningful or only on being different or only on being salient—they weave all three qualities together. In his Millward Brown Point of View titled “China's Top 50: Much Progress but More to Do,” Peter Walshe details the striking success of Chinese brands that are meaningful, different, and salient. A similar analysis of the global BrandZ database, in which we compare brands that are low on all three qualities with those that are high on all three, shows the same pattern.

Brands that are meaningful, different, and salient derive three times more of their volume from the strength of the brand, as opposed to factors like availability and promotions. Furthermore, they command a price that is 14 percent higher, and their growth in value share is, on average, six percentage points higher than brands that are low on meaning, difference, and salience.

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#### UNDERSTANDING CONSUMER BRAINS

We know that successful brands are meaningful, different, and salient, but to maximize the power of marketing, we need to know more than that. We need to understand how these brand qualities act on the minds of consumers to affect purchase decisions.



It is relatively easy to understand the effect of salience. Salience gives a brand an advantage because of the habitual nature of much human behavior. In shopping, consumers rely on mental shortcuts or heuristics when they make their brand decisions. One such heuristic is to assign greater importance to things that have ready mental availability, the effect of which is to choose the most salient brand.

Compared to brand salience, the role of brand meaning in consumer decision-making is complex, as it involves both cognition and affect. However, we have learned that we can measure

how meaningful brands are by using some simple and straightforward questions. In his book *The Branded Mind*, Erik du Plessis builds on the ideas of Antonio Damasio to suggest that simple questions about how the brand makes you feel and how well it satisfies your needs can be used to summarize the overall impact of functional associations and feelings on brand decisions. We use questions like these to measure and define how meaningful brands are. So du Plessis' interpretation of Damasio's theory helps us understand how brand meaning influences consumer choice.

Of the three critical elements, difference is the one that is most often overlooked, with some arguing that being different is just a special case of being meaningful. The argument is that differentiation is delivering a brand property that others don't deliver, and the effect is the same as delivering a brand property better than others. In either case, the brand just becomes more meaningful. However, experiments in behavioral psychology have demonstrated that when similar alternatives compete against each other, they all become less attractive, while if one option stands apart from the rest, even if the difference is not particularly meaningful, that option becomes more attractive.

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These experiments have tended to focus on considered human decisions involving relatively unfamiliar objects or concepts. Therefore, this learning is most applicable when for some reason a consumer's normal habits are disrupted and he or she is considering less familiar brands. This may help explain why difference is one of the strongest markers of future growth, as Helen Fearn notes in her 2010 *Point of View*, "Growing a Strong Brand: Defining Your Meaningful Point of Difference."

Brands stand to gain even more when they offer points of difference that are truly important, even if the importance is only temporary or fleeting. Consider my relationship with three different soft drinks back in my student days. I wasn't a great fan of Red Bull. I didn't feel a personal connection with the brand, and I didn't particularly like the taste. On the other hand, I felt reasonably warm toward Pepsi and did like the taste. Overall, Pepsi was more meaningful to me. However, the trouble for Pepsi was that I felt even warmer toward Coca-Cola and preferred the taste of that, so I tended to choose Coke over Pepsi. But on certain nights out, Red Bull felt like the only drink that delivered the desired combination of an energy hit and social cachet. The result was that I barely ever bought Pepsi, but did occasionally buy Red Bull, and when I did I was willing to pay a high price for it because there was no substitute.

It is probably true to say that I was choosing Red Bull because it was the most meaningful brand for my need state at that moment, so in a sense its difference was "just a special case of meaning." However, for marketers, the crucial point is that brands that achieve this special state of offering something truly different are chosen more often and can charge a higher price.

### OBSERVING CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

Our knowledge of the characteristics of successful brands and the latest thinking on human decision-making underscore the importance of meaning, difference, and salience. But can we quantify the influence of each of these elements on consumer purchase volume and price paid?

To investigate this, we ran a groundbreaking global pilot. We linked respondents' survey responses with their actual purchase behavior as well as neuroscience data to get a full picture of how raw emotional response in the brain links to how brands are perceived, and how that in turn influences their purchase choices. This study helped identify the best ways to measure how meaningful, different, and salient brands are, and confirmed that these are the

three most important brand influences on purchase behavior.

The contribution of each of the three qualities was different depending on whether we were looking at purchase volume or price paid. To drive volume, it is most important for a brand to first be meaningful and then be salient. Difference is slightly less important. Being meaningful is also the most important quality in justifying a price premium; after that, being different is next in importance, while being salient matters less. The exact proportions vary by category; we can quantify these to help focus marketing efforts.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR MARKETERS

Marketers, ask yourselves: Do you expect your brand to make money by selling a greater volume of product or by selling at a higher price? Only a handful of brands are compelling enough to do both, i.e., to deliver high volume at a premium price.

#### MAKE YOUR BRAND MEANINGFUL

Whether your objective is volume or price, in either case your brand needs to be meaningful, so ask these questions: Does your brand meet the functional needs of consumers? Are you communicating your brand's story in a meaningful way? And does your combination of story and functional delivery make people feel good?

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Of the brands we measured in our pilot work, Coca-Cola and British Airways were among the most meaningful. Both achieved that status through great product delivery that met consumers' core needs, as well as marketing that elevated the brands into emotional territory and made consumers feel good about them.

## GROW VOLUME THROUGH BEING SALIENT

If growing volume is the goal, then salience is the next most important consideration after meaning. But salience is not simply top-of-mind awareness triggered by the category name; our pilot work confirmed that salience is best measured in association with category needs. For example, British Airways was the strongest brand on traditional top-of-mind awareness for the airline category in the UK. But when we applied a needs-based approach to salience, it was easyJet that came through as the most salient brand. That's because easyJet has built an extremely strong association with low price, one of the most important category needs. So, to build salience, you must not only shout louder than the competition, but you must shout about things that relate to category needs.

## TO COMMAND A HIGHER PRICE, BE DIFFERENT

If your objective is to sell your brand at a higher price, focus on being different. For an example of great brand differentiation, we can look to Apple, the most valuable brand in the world according to the 2011 BrandZ Top 100. Though Apple does well on each element, its most outstanding performance in nearly every category and country is on being different. The basis for this success is Apple's consistently great product innovation, but Apple also goes beyond functional differentiation to project a unique personality and a clear set of values.

Not all product innovations can capture people's imaginations as the Macintosh, the iPhone, and the iPad have done, but all brand owners should work to establish genuine points of meaningful product differentiation. And even where there is limited scope for functional differentiation, brands should still strive to differentiate through their personality and values.



## CONSIDER THE POWER OF THREE

The most successful brands are not just meaningful, just different, or just salient—they are all three. Don't sell your brand short by using a myopic model of brand building that only acknowledges one of the three ingredients. Instead, acknowledge the importance of all three and use consumer insight, knowledge of the category, and brand objectives to identify the best area of focus.

To read more about making brands meaningful, different, and salient, please visit [www.mb-blog.com](http://www.mb-blog.com).

If you enjoyed "The Power of Being Meaningful, Different, and Salient" you might also be interested in:

"Not Just Different but Meaningfully Different"

"It Is Not a Choice: Brands Should Seek Differentiation and Distinctiveness"

"Growing a Strong Brand: Defining Your Meaningful Point of Difference"