

Best to Keep It Simple

When I was growing up, I bought my jeans at Gap. Back then, Gap was jeans. Even after all these years, it's hard for me to go by a Gap store without mentally hearing its old advertising jingle. "Fall into the Gap," sang the doo-wop baritone in descending notes. I wasn't exactly sure what "fall into the Gap" meant, but I knew exactly what it meant as a brand: "Buy your jeans here and you'll never have to worry about whether or not you're cool." How cool is that?

Today, however, Gap is struggling with what it means, something even the best brands go through from time to time. After many years and many successful identity iterations (it ceased being about jeans long ago), it seems to be unsure of what it represents to consumers. The challenge it's facing is how to set itself apart from its myriad competitors in a unique and meaningful way. This is a precarious position to occupy in a world where brands of every sort are proliferating at warp speed.

Three commonalities

If you consider any of the most powerful brands on the planet, from Virgin to HBO, Titleist to FedEx, Las Vegas to Bono, Google to YouTube, it's very clear what they stand for as brands. These marques are driven by the three critical factors behind every successful company. First, every intelligent brand represents something different in the minds of consumers. Second, this difference is meaningful to the consumers they want to reach. Third, this relevant differentiation has been made simple for people to understand.

In a world as hyper-branded as ours, there is neither room nor time for questions about a brand's meaning. Exhibit even a hint of self-doubt and consumers will gladly leave your brand for another.

Clarity of meaning

But it's important to clarify one thing: the distinction between the words "brand" and "branding." They're often used interchangeably, and incorrectly

so. A brand is something that exists in your head. It's an image or a feeling. It's based on associations that get stirred up when a brand's name is mentioned. The "ing" part—branding—is the signal or expression of the brand that generates images and feelings. Branding signals include advertising, package design, product design, functionality, retail environments, online experiences, public relations and human behavior. Branding is the process by which brand images get into your head.

If you were to ask people how successful brands get built, most would likely say it starts with the branding. But they'd be absolutely wrong. Building a successful brand starts with establishing a differentiated meaning for your brand. Then, obviously, working out if this difference will actually matter to anyone. It's only after you've done this that you can begin to think about the branding.

One of the proprietary tools in the brand industry demonstrates this point. It is called BrandAsset Valuator® (BAV), and was developed by ad agency Young & Rubicam. BAV measures current brand strength and determines its future strength. It's based on the inter-relationship of four brand pillars (see chart on page 2):

- Differentiation— a brand's point of difference
- Relevance— how appropriate the brand is to consumer needs
- Esteem— how the brand is regarded
- Knowledge— how intimately the brand is understood

Brands should be built one pillar at a time, differentiation being the first, most critical step. The relationship between differentiation and relevance provides an indication of a brand's strength. Differentiation without relevance is of no value, literally and figuratively.

The Segway, a two-wheeled power scooter for adults, is a good example of what happens if you hop onto a "different" brand idea without determining if it

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has any relevance to consumers. Launched with an unprecedented degree of hype, these nifty vehicles were going to revolutionize the transportation industry. Instead, all types of roadblocks, including price, bans in urban areas and legitimate questions about its utility, prevented the Segway from coming anywhere near its first-year sales estimations. After enormous investment, the brand is still trying to overcome an identity crisis.

Yet too much relevance can also be a problem. It means the brand has become a commodity. Its uniqueness has faded and price becomes the only reason to buy. Many airlines are in this situation, including Northwest, American and United. It's hard for me to determine why one is any better or different than another.

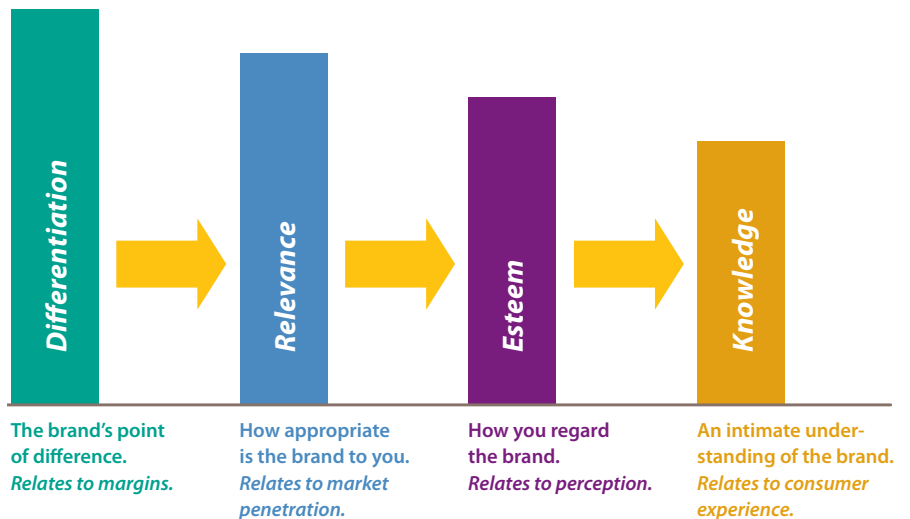
The last two pillars, esteem and knowledge, make up a brand's stature. One with a high level of esteem enjoys a stellar reputation although people may not know a lot about it. In this case, the brand is in perfect position to convince consumers to get to know it better. Bang & Olufsen electronics, Barilla pasta and Coach leatherware are good examples.

Too much knowledge and not enough esteem, on the other hand, can be a dangerous thing. Consumers might say, "Hey, I know a lot about you and you're nothing special."

In leading brands, all four pillars are strong: Nike, Apple and Disney fit this bill.

Perhaps one of the most interesting things about BAV is that it's based on the premise that almost all successful brands begin with a very simple idea. A brand doesn't start out by declaring it's going to sell or be lots of things to lots of people. It starts by determining how to sell or be one thing to a few people and ensuring that it's different and better in some meaningful way.

Brand Asset Valuator: the four brand pillars



Identifying relevant differentiation

But with the exponential increase in global brand competition, how do you go about identifying a point of relevant differentiation for your brand? I suggest that one of the best places to start your quest is not in your office. To be blunt, get out.

Listen to family and friends, read blogs, forget the over-done strategy documents. Become like the American comedian Jerry Seinfeld—an astute observer of the obvious. What universal truth may have been overlooked that might lead to a brilliant brand idea?

Bose, for example, designed its line of superior headphones by observing the obvious gap in the market and developing solutions to this. As Jerry might have asked: "Ever wonder why they hand you those itty, bitty headphones on an airplane and expect you to hear the movie over the roar of Rolls-Royce engines?"

Another exercise that can aid in the establishment of relevant difference has to do with identifying the "brand enemy." Instead of trying to determine what you want your brand to represent, determine



what you don't want it to represent. This is how the Target discount chain became such a huge success in the United States. While other big-box discount brands tout price, Target touts style. As obvious as it sounds now, no other retailer had thought to make it socially hip to buy stylish fashions and household goods at low prices.

The ultimate goal: simplicity

If differentiation and relevance are the first two factors that drive brand success, then simplicity is the third. Consumers have to be able to "get" what your brand means. But for this to happen, the people inside – those responsible for the branding – must be able to get it first.

To this end, all successful brands should take their relevant differentiation and capture it in what we call a Brand Driver™ – a simple phrase or statement that sums up and evokes exactly what the brand stands for without need for explanation. The simplicity of a brand driver allows those responsible for branding to grasp its intent, internalize it and intuitively deliver experiences consistent with the brand idea and, consequently, the brand promise. A concise brand driver creates memorable, breakthrough branding.

Unlike years ago, when branding consisted primarily of traditional advertising, logos and the aforementioned jingles, building a brand these days is much like a journey. Consumers travel from one brand interaction to another, picking up branding signals along the way. While all branding signals must be in alignment with the brand driver to be effective, not all branding signals are created equal in their ability to have impact on consumers. Some points of interaction along a customer's experiential brand journey are more powerful than others at engendering the right brand image.

Creating a map of a customer's journey with the brand helps illustrate which points of interaction have the greatest potential to reinforce appropriate brand associations. It is at these points that you'll likely be making your greatest branding investments. Gatorade, for example, ensures its thirst-quenching drink can be seen on the sidelines of athletic events, both amateur and professional. The ability to hydrate

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on the real field of play has become Gatorade's proprietary and most powerful branding signal.

There is no secret to brand health, just as there is no secret to maintaining success. The best brands find something relevantly different to represent in the minds of consumers and do what's required, despite any challenges, to stay that way. They also make it simple to understand. This shows in their branding and it shows in their performance numbers. While not always simple to achieve, it is just that simple. ■

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