

A question of identity

Dr Billy Coop based his doctoral research on the premise that brand identity is a critical construct, and extends far beyond the simplistic definitions of brand name, sign or logo.

The highly competitive and dynamic business environment in which brands compete for share of mind, necessitates a deep understanding of the very nature of brands and consumer behaviour. Much has been written about brand image and its importance, but relatively little research has addressed brand identity from the perspective of its associations and impact on consumer behaviour. According to Dr Billy Coop without a strong brand identity a brand is unlikely to survive in the long term. Therefore, according to Coop, more emphasis should be placed on understanding the critical dimensions and characteristics of brand identity as a prerequisite for brand success.

Brand identity is described by Coop in terms of the psychological and emotional associations that the brand aspires to maintain in the minds of consumers. Too often brand identity is relegated to the mere visual component of the brand, such as the brand logo and brand colours. Insufficient attention is paid to the associations aligned to the brand identity itself and the impact that these associations have on the brand image, brand loyalty and most importantly, brand commitment.

According to David Aaker, brand identity has been described as the cornerstone of brand strategy and brand building, and is therefore critical to the long-term sustainability of any brand (Aaker, 1996). Brand identity may be further described as the ethos, aims and values that present a sense of individuality, which differentiates a brand from its competitors.

The identity of a brand therefore provides the direction, purpose and meaning for the brand, and is central to a brand's strategic vision.

Key drivers of brand

In part, a brand is a set of promises, which imply trust, consistency, and a defined set of expectations (Davis, 2000:3)

The power of a brand therefore lies in its ability to influence purchasing behaviour. The critical importance of identifying the key drivers of a brand that will create and sustain brand commitment, formed the basis for Coop's doctoral thesis. The motivation for Coop's research was based on the premise that brand identity is a critical construct, and extends far beyond the simplistic definitions of brand name, sign or logo, and by its very cognitive nature includes many additional paradigms.

During a brand choice situation consumers process brand information dimensionally or by attribute, focusing

on those distinctive associations and benefits that provide the greatest justification for choice (Sen, 1999). Brands are often likely to be associated with abstract information based on the collective or selective evaluation of key dimensions and attributes. For example, Harley-Davidson is a name that creates strong emotional associations with freedom and is not simply the name of a motorcycle. Harley owners are HOGS – members of a unique group who aspire to something greater than the sum of the individual parts. The Harley Owners Group represent a brand whose identity creates distinct visual images, associations and metaphors for all owners who have established a relationship with the Harley brand.

Brand associations can also be created in a variety of other ways:

- By direct experience with the brand
- From information communicated about the brand by the company or other sources such as consumer reports
- Word of mouth
- Subjectively, through assumptions or perceptions from the brand itself (e.g., its name or logo)
- From the identification of the brand with a company, country, channel of distribution, or some particular person, place or event

Brand attitudes

Brands (and their associated images) allow consumers to express who they are, what they are, and how they want to be viewed by other people (Graeff, 1996:3). Therefore, understanding the process by which consumers form brand attitudes and purchase intentions is, by implication, of vital importance to brand managers and brand researchers

Research, according to MacInnis (2002), has taught that consumers usually remember something better and for much longer periods of time, if they imagine it. Research reports that approximately 93 percent of the meaning contained in any message is nonverbal, and that only seven per cent of the meaning contained in any message is verbal and that no more than 30 percent of the meaning of social exchange is conveyed by words (Mehrabian, 1971; Knapp, 1980). In summary, it can be safely assumed that there are a number of factors that will affect the strength of brand associations. Two important factors are:

- Relevance of the brand information and the brand itself from a need-satisfying perspective.
- The consistency with which that brand information is presented to consumers at any one point in time, as well as over time.

Relevant dimensions and attributes

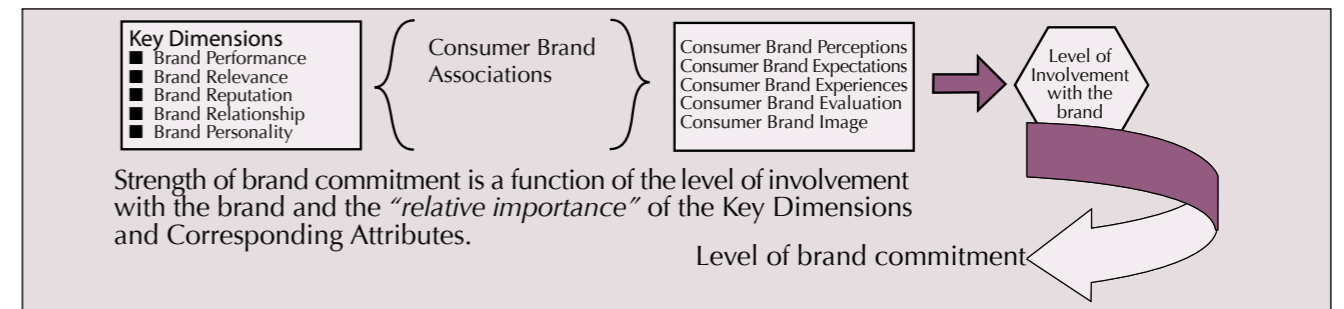
The experiences of Hofmeyr and Rice (2000:170), convinced them that the task of shifting the perception of a brand on image attributes is a daunting one, and is seldom successful. When it is achieved, it will only be because of a single-minded focus on the attribute for many years. They believe that a more realistic challenge will be to attempt to change the salience of certain attributes, and therefore they postulate that the marketing challenge is not one of changing perceptions, but increasing the importance of a dimension in the decision-making process. This approach is more likely to yield positive results than attempting to change the perception of an attribute from being a weakness to one of being a strength for the brand (Hofmeyr & Rice, 2000:170).

The concept of relevant dimensions and relevant attributes was an important consideration in terms of the development of Coop's BrandDriver model, which was the result of his doctoral thesis on the analysis and evaluation of brand identity as a driver of brand commitment. Brand identity, according to Coop, is a critical component in establishing a relationship between the brand and the customer, and a strong brand identity will impact directly upon the image of the brand. According to Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2000:263), building associations, the heart of brand building, is driven by the brand identity. However, the goal is not only strong associations but also a differentiated brand, and brand loyalty needs to be based on unique characteristics. Hofmeyr and Rice (2000:3) clearly distinguish between loyalty and commitment. Loyalty is behavioural and is about what consumers do, while commitment is psychological and relates to what consumers think and feel. Loyalty is therefore behavioural, while commitment is psychological. Purchasing a brand repeatedly but without attachment is behavioural but not attitudinal loyalty, while a consumer who purchases a brand regularly and repeatedly and with attachment is both behaviourally and attitudinally loyal (Hofmeyr & Rice, 2000:87).

Brand identity construct

Consumer behaviour is often driven by pure perceptions of a brand in the form of clusters of associations and brand attributes that consumers connect with the brand name and the brand identity. These associations and attributes are grouped within specific dimensions that form the basis of consumer brand motivation, dependent upon their relative

Brand Identity Construct (BrandDriver Model)



importance to the consumer. Coop identified five key dimensions which comprised his brand identity construct namely; the reputation of the brand, the relationship with the brand, the relevance of the brand, the performance of the brand and the personality of the brand. Specific attributes were then aligned to each of these five dimensions. The fundamental premise upon which the model is based is that people think in images, not words, and these associations and images to a large degree, are the drivers of our psychological and emotional decision-making and long-term commitment to a brand.

Research objectives

The objective of the research, was to measure the relative importance of the five dimensions and corresponding attributes of the brand identity construct as a driver of brand commitment. Research was conducted across six market sectors namely, cosmetics, internet service providers, business schools, financial services, haircare providers and cellphone providers. The research was both quantitative, (totaling 1972 respondents) and qualitative, comprising seven focus groups and 20 depth interviews. All quantitative data was processed through the Conversion Model, the world's leading measure of brand commitment.

The research measured the relative importance of each of the five dimensions and corresponding attributes for a range of brands within each of the six industry segments. Similarities and differences in terms of the relative importance of the five dimensions and corresponding attributes were identified across each of the six sectors. The relative importance factor for each of the dimensions and corresponding attributes of the brand identity construct provided insight into the meaning and level of importance that committed and uncommitted users ascribe to each dimension and corresponding attribute.

Coop contends that dimensions and attributes should therefore be linked as part of the brand management process in order to gain a more effective holistic understanding of consumer cognitive and emotional processes during brand decision-making. This implies that the five dimensions therefore become the collective heuristic, or decision rules, by which consumers continually evaluate brands. ■

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