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Attributes, benefits and attitudes

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Building a brand

A brand is more than a firm's identification tag on a product. The purpose of branding is to create an identity for the product being marketed. Branding is the process of creating brand elements that can be assigned a meaning, which in turn creates brand equity.

Brand 'meaning' is created by associating certain product elements with the brand being marketed. The meaning is the way a given brand is different from its competitors. If a consumer associates 'reliability', 'excellent service' and 'state of the art configuration' with a brand of computer, then *reliability*, *excellent service*, *state-of-the-art configuration* is the meaning attached to the brand. Not every component of the brand has to be unique. However, if all the elements designed to convey the 'meaning' of a brand are also shared by other brands, then the meaning is blurred and provides no special brand equity. In extreme cases of brand differentiation, a brand becomes a commodity. For instance, although there are different brands of salt, the basic characteristics are generally perceived to be shared by all brands. As a result, the product is considered a commodity by most consumers. While the product may be branded, most consumers may simply accept any available brand.

Brand image

Brand image refers to perceptions about a brand. They are in fact brand associations that reside in the consumer's memory. These associations - their nature, strength, favourability and strength - bestow meaning to a brand from a consumer's point of view.

Types of brand associations

Brand associations include attributes, benefits, and attitudes.

Exhibit 1 Types of brand associations

- Attitudes
- Attributes
- Benefits

Attributes

Attributes refer to descriptive features of a product or service. They can be either product related or non-product related.

Exhibit 2**Attribute dimensions relevant to brand perception**

Attributes:

- Tangible (Product-related)
- Intangible (Non-product related)

Price:

- User image
- Usage occasion image
- Brand personality
- Affective image

1) Product related attributes.

Product related attributes relates to *tangible aspects* of a product or service. Such tangibles could include size, ingredients and flavour. They can be common across all brands (in which case, the brand has little significance) or each individual brand may have its own unique set of tangibles.

2) Non-product related attributes.

Non-product related attributes include user-type image, usage-occasion image, brand personality, affective image and price.

Here is an example of *user-type image* :

Who is the typical driver of a BMW?

- Young or old?
- A man or a woman?
- Well-educated or less well-educated?
- Extroverted or introverted?

An example of *usage occasion image* is:

When is one likely to use a BMW?

- When one is driving to work
- When one is driving for pleasure
- When one wants to get to the destination fast
- When one wants to impress others.

Brand personality.

Brand personality is the result of treating a brand as if it were a person. What adjectives would you use to describe the brand: dull, exciting, current, dated, youthful?

Affective image.

Affective image refers to the feeling a brand evokes in a consumer. What emotions is a brand associated with - carefree, amusing, robust, uneasiness or fun?

Price-quality image.

Price is more complex than many other product dimensions. While price is a tangible item, price is related to perception of quality and value. For instance, a high priced product may be variously perceived as 'exclusive', 'value for money', 'snobbish', 'classy', 'cheaper in the long run', or 'wasteful'. For many products, price interacts with other image variables and vice versa. It is for reasons like these that price-quality is often considered to be a non-product-related item.

The five non-tangible aspects of a product (user image, usage occasion image, brand personality, affective image

and price-quality image) along with the tangible aspects of a product define the brand associations from the attribute angle.

Benefits

Benefits associated with a product are the second aspect of brand imagery. What do consumers think a product can do for them? (A car take them from point A to point B.) What does the product represent? (A product might, for instance, represent wealth.) How does a product 'feel'? (A car may provide a 'smooth ride'.)

The benefits associated with a product can be broadly classified into three categories: functional benefits, symbolic benefits and experiential benefits. (C. Whan Park, et al. Strategic Brand Concept-Image Management. *Journal of Marketing* , 50, October 1986, pp. 621-635.)

Exhibit 3

Three benefit categories

Benefits :

- *Functional* - Product features
- *Symbolic* - Product perceptions
- *Experimental* - Product experiences

1) Functional benefits.

These are tangible features of a product or service. These features are expected to provide a solution to some 'problem' faced by a consumer or enhances some aspect of a consumer's life: shoes protect one's feet; a cell phone keeps you in touch when you are on the move and, a watch shows you the time. Some brands have strong functional associations (e.g., Xerox with copying, IBM with computers and Microsoft with software) and others less so.

Strong functional associations are desirable to have. However, when functional associations are too strong, they have the disadvantage of making the brand name a generic one. As a result, the firm stands to lose its claim to the exclusive use of the brand name itself. (To illustrate, Alladin Industries Incorporated used the term Thermos to identify its product, although it is a trade name of the American Thermos Product Company. In a 1962 court case, Thermos was deemed to be a term usable in a generic fashion, resulting in the loss of exclusivity, the essence of branding. In 1975, Teflon faced a similar battle.)

Firms strongly resist such loss of exclusivity since a brand name applied to functionality rather than to the brand may result in the erosion of brand equity from an economic point of view.

2) Symbolic benefits

Symbolic benefits tend to be non-product-related. These tend to be the 'meaning' consumers attach to a brand: *prestigious* car, *exclusive* club, or *impressive* neighbourhood. Expensive brands deliberately promote symbolic benefits. For instance, American Express offers its platinum card only 'by invitation'; you can visit the sales offices of some high-end condominiums 'only by appointment'.

Symbolic benefits are aimed at a consumer's need for social approval, self-esteem, and quest for the 'best things in life'. Because symbolic benefits are not necessarily related to functional benefits, strong symbolic imagery, once created, can command a huge premium. For instance, an exclusive perfume can be priced 100 times higher than a run-of-the-mill perfume.

A brand with high symbolic benefits can become a 'badge' product. (A badge product is a product which is assumed to make a 'statement' about the person using it. For instance a person who prefers Prada can see himself or herself as more modern and younger compared to someone using other designers' products.)

Earlier we noted how a brand with no distinguishing characteristics can become a commodity. If we put such brands at one extreme of the continuum, 'badge' products will be at the other end of the continuum. Products at the commodity end are perfectly substitutable, while products at the 'badge' end are more difficult to substitute - in extreme cases they are not substitutable at all - a consumer may not accept a substitute brand if the preferred brand is not available.

This makes symbolic benefits an extremely important part of brand equity for high-priced products. There is some evidence to show that not only are consumers willing to pay a high price, but one of the features that makes many products exclusive, is high price.

3) *Experiential benefits*

Experiential benefits are those experienced by the user as a result of usage. They can be both product as well as non-product related. Cottonelle is 'soft' - it can be a product feature as well as an image created by advertisements. A consumer can experience a beer as 'smooth' because of its lower alcohol content or because of the image projected in its communications campaign.

In many cases, consumers cannot reliably be expected to notice minor sensory-based differences or improvements in products. It is for this reason that minor improvements and features are highlighted and promoted by marketers.

Attitudes

Attitudes refer to overall evaluations of a brand. They are abstractions based on attributes and beliefs. Attitudes are not always easy to measure but brand choice depends on attitudes.

Consider an insurance company issuing a policy. A given policy has certain features (attributes) and the company may be perceived to be dependable and to provide value for money (image). Based on these, a consumer may come to some conclusions about the policy being offered (attitudes). These attitudes determine choice - whether to buy the policy or not.

How are attitudes arrived at? There are many models. We will look into some of these models more closely later on. One of the most widely used models states that we first form beliefs about a product. For instance, we may form the following beliefs about computers:

- Fast
- Reliable
- Large storage capacity
- Easy to use
- Easy to get serviced
- Reasonably priced
- Excellent after-sales service

and so on. However, of all these, only a few may have a bearing on a person's purchase behaviour. These attributes may be termed 'salient attributes'. For instance, the user may not care whether a computer is reasonably priced or not as long as it fulfills his or her other requirements. So for this customer, price is not salient.

Exhibit 4 **From attributes to attitudes**

- Attributes
- Salient attributes
- Importance of salient attributes
- Attitudes

Once we identify the salient attributes we can then ask the consumers how important each salient attribute is to him or her. When we weight each salient attribute by its importance and add them together we arrive at an attitude score.

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