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# Brand Associations

By Chuck Chakrapani

**Brand Associations**How strongly is a brand associated with different attributes? The strength of associations between an a brand and its salient attributes will determine how memorable the brand is. High brand recall, in turn, can increase the probability of purchase.

## Origin of consumer beliefs

Consumer beliefs about brand attributes and benefits are generated in three ways: (1) direct experience with the brand; (2)communication about the brand; and (3) impressions formed about the brand through brand related information.

### Exhibit 1 Origin of consumer beliefs

*Consumer Beliefs:*

- Direct experience
- Communication about the brand
- Impressions from brand-related impressions

Direct experience is a strong determinant of beliefs about brand attributes. However, it has a less powerful influence on functional products than on image-based products. For instance, a computer user is likely to form his or her impressions based on direct experience - irrespective of how others might feel about it. On the other hand, for image-oriented products, the communication aspects - how it is perceived by experts and other users may carry greater weight in forming beliefs about that brand.

Communication about a brand can emanate from a number of sources. The most influential type of communication is a personal recommendation from friends and family (Source: The Roper Organization research 1992). While advertising and other promotional communications do influence consumers, their influence is weaker and can be easily superseded by other available information.

## Strength of associations

If strength of associations determines which brands will be recalled, what determines the strength of associations? What determines whether such information will be stored in memory for easy recall later?

The obvious answer is repetition. Any association repeated continually forms a memory trace: Fedex "when it has got to get there", Fleecy is "soft on hands", Saab is "safe".

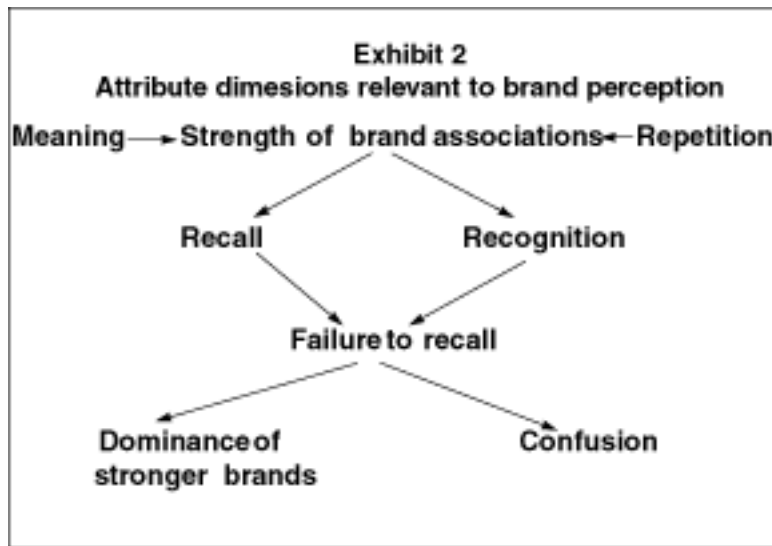
Psychologists suggest other factors as well. The most important factor is the meaning a consumer attaches to information. Thus an expert who understands the significance of the new communications technology will have strong associations with products (brands) that deal with the internet compared to someone who uses the internet only sparingly. Similarly, if a new user spends a lot of time understanding the significance of different product features, that person will have strong brand associations.

Because two main factors - meaning (relevance) and communication - affect the strength of brand associations, advertising has the twin aim of creating a consistent messages and repeating them as often as possible.

## Recall of brand associations

While the strength of brand associations is important for the recall of a brand, there are other factors that affect brand recall as well.

The most important of these is noise or the interference produced by similar products and similar brands. Such interference works in two different ways.



First, noise causes some smaller brands to be overlooked. For instance, if one is asked to name a fast food hamburger chain, one is likely to mention the most common ones such as McDonald's, Burger King, or Wendy's. Although the respondent may be aware of many other fast food chains, bigger chains are likely to be mentioned far more often. This can be immediately verified by asking an aided question. Aided questions almost always produce a larger list, thereby confirming the difference between what is immediately recalled and what is known to the respondent.

While the task of the marketing researcher is to identify both aided and unaided recall scores, the marketer's task is to transfer a brand from the recognition set to the recall set of the (potential) consumer.

Transferring a brand from a recognition set to a recall set is usually achieved by heavy advertising and consistent message - the same factors that are the basis of strong brand associations.

Second, a consumer may fail to recall a brand because of confusion. Such confusion could be because of the message or because brands have similar names.

*Information confusion* . For instance, a consumer may store the information that 'Saab, which is a Scandinavian car, is judged to be a safe car' as 'The car that is safe is Scandinavian'. As time passes by, when safety is mentioned, the consumer may attribute the feature "safety" to Volvo since it is also Scandinavian and may not even think about Saab.

*Name confusion* . When two brands have similar sounding names, the consumer may mistakenly choose one name, even though that may not be the brand he or she is interested in. For instance, a consumer who is unfamiliar with computer makers may confuse Hewlett Packard with Packard Bell.

*Extraneous factors* . Brand images can be created by the use of what may be broadly labelled extraneous factors. For instance, early advertising campaigns by mbanx emphasized the bank's image without stressing the product offering. Body Shop is another example - it projects an image that stresses its social concerns rather than its product superiority.

### **Research questions**

As marketing researchers, we need to test three aspects of brand communications:

1. Is the advertising relevant to the consumer? Is it meaningfully associated with the brand in question?

2. How frequently has the consumer been exposed to marketing communications? Does a consumer remember (directly or indirectly) the message?

3. Is the brand in the recall as opposed to the recognition sets? If it is not in the recall set, what are the interfering factors? Conflicting messages? Conflicting brand names?

### **Favourability of associations**

Recall of brand names is only the beginning. Even if a brand can be recalled easily, recall is of little use if associations are negative. For instance, when you recall models of cars, you may recall a model because of the adverse publicity it received. In this case, the fact that the car is in your recall set rather than your recognition set, may not be useful from a marketing point of view.

#### **Exhibit 3 Components of favourability**

*Favourability:*

- Desirability
- Deliverability:
  - Image
  - Tangibles

Favourability is the result of desirability and deliverability.

### ***Desirability***

According to the Means-Ends model (on which laddering technique is based), people motivations follow a hierarchical structure.

Consumer choice is initially based on attributes (A) of the product - for instance, your long distance phone company treats you with courtesy and respect. This in turn leads to some consequences (C) - you feel respected and valued. Such consequences satisfy some underlying value (V) - in our example this could be your self-esteem.

There can be several end values. In fact in our example, the ends values could be self-esteem, security, or sense of belonging. In fact, the marketer may want to segment the market based on end values.

The desirability of an association could be derived from the extent to which an attribute is seen to fulfill an ends value to a consumer. For instance, high cost may not necessarily be an undesirable characteristic to a consumer whose ends value is a sense of accomplishment. He or she may perceive that high cost (C) is a consequence of high quality (A) which in turn leads to a sense of accomplishment (V).

So in researching the desirability of brand associations it is not enough just to measure whether the association is positive or negative overall. We also need to know how the same attribute may be interpreted differently by different market segments.

### ***Deliverability***

Desirability is only part of the equation. It is important that the firm deliver the desired benefit. In fact, marketing campaigns can fail when what is promised in advertising -either product or service quality - is not fully delivered. This gap can be damaging mainly because consumers' attention is now focussed on the difference between what is promised and what is delivered.

**Tangible vs. image aspects of delivery.** Not all desirable promises are tangible. It is possible to design a car that fulfills the promise of fuel efficiency, but does not deliver prestige. This creates two classes of promise fulfillment: one corresponding to tangible aspects of a product or service and another corresponding to image aspects.

In terms of research measurement, it is important to distinguish the two types of benefits because they segment the market differently. While the tangible benefits segment the market primarily by product characteristics, image benefits segment the market primarily by consumer characteristics.

These differences in deliverability can create an unusual set of marketing circumstances. For instance, while brands in general seek to maximize sales by increasing tangible benefits, image oriented products may actually restrict sales in an attempt to create an image of exclusivity. In such cases, what is lost in unit sales is expected to be compensated by higher unit profit.

There is another problem as well. When research indicates that a product lacks a tangible benefit, such a benefit can easily be added to the product. Not so with intangible image characteristics. If a line of clothing is perceived to be low-end, it is much more difficult to change it than by 'adding' the right image characteristics.

Tangible benefits can be added or subtracted at any time while image benefits are relatively enduring. Moreover, the movement of image characteristics is asymmetrical: it is easier to go from a positive to a negative image in a relatively short period of time while it is a lot more difficult to move from a negative to a positive image.

The vulnerability of image brand benefits can be avoided by supporting the image benefits with tangible ones. For instance, a 'safe' car is an image attribute, and this image can be supported by product attributes that are associated with safety. A perfume that projects the image of high quality may reinforce the image by using special ingredients that are not generally used in other perfumes. Reinforcing image benefits with tangible benefits makes the image more enduring.

It is easier to create a desirable image for a new product but it is much more difficult to sustain this image.

*Sustainability* of the brand image is important for several reasons. If brand image cannot be sustained it cannot form the basis for building brand equity. And as we noted before, if a positive image turns negative, it is very difficult to reverse.

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