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Brand identities and self-relevant segments

By Chuck Chakrapani

Brand identities are brand elements that differentiate the brand. They include brand names, slogans, logos, packaging elements, symbols and jingles. Because these identities lead to brand equity, they can be protected through copyright, trademark and patent laws.

Because of the importance of brand identities to brand equity, there are many criteria for building these identities.

The most basic of all the criteria is *memorability*. Since we want our brand to be in the consumers evoked set (top of mind), brand identities should be memorable. Memorability has two components: quick recall and quick recognition. The former is measured through unaided recall and the latter through aided recall.

Memorability is often related to meaning. For instance, how well does the brand name describes the product? As I write this, most companies which have the suffix ".com" (eg. Broadcast.com, Yahoo.com,) are assumed to be internet related. Such assumptions might affect brand equities positively or negatively.

While it is not always possible to build brand elements that are meaningful - many major trade names such as Xerox or Dell do not relate to product identities - it is useful to do so whenever possible.

In any case, it is important not to have a name that has a negative meaning to customers. While for marketers would not knowingly choose a brand name with negative connotations, surprises sometimes happen. For instance, Clairol introduced a curling iron, Mist Stick, and later found that in Germany, mist was a slang for manure. Chevy Nova has a problem in Spanish speaking countries where no va meant 'no go', not a great brand name for an automobile.

So, while meaningful names tend to be memorable, they face the problem of poor generalizability across different cultures.

This leads us to the second criterion for building brand equity - *generalizability*. Since brand identities build brand equity, it is important that they can be generalized. When we introduce a brand extension or even a completely new brand, can the brand identities (at least a substantial part of them), be transferred to the new brand? Brand identities with high generalizability potential should be preferred to those with low potential.

Generalizability is becoming increasingly important in a geographical sense. With business becoming increasingly global, it is important that generalizability applies to different geographical regions.

Consider this example from Pepsi. Its slogan, *Pepsi brings you back to life*, translated in Chinese as *Pepsi brings your ancestors back from the grave*. While one cannot completely anticipate how generalizable different phrases and symbols might be, increasingly generalizability is a consideration in choosing brand elements.

Related to generalizability is the concept of adaptability. Brand identities need to be updated over time. For instance, many firms modernize their logos. How adaptable are the brand elements?

Either of the above criteria - memorability and generalizability - do not mean much if we do not have the rights to use the identities. So the third criterion is *defendability*.

Defendability has in two aspects - legal and competitive. From a legal point of view, we choose brand elements that are legally registerable and defendable internationally. In addition, we must be vigilant about unauthorized use of the identities.

From a competitive stand point, some identities can be copied easily and violations are sometimes difficult to prove. For instance, words and phrases that are less common are more difficult to copy and therefore identities violations can be proved more easily.

In Canada and the U.S., survey research is frequently used in legal trials to demonstrate brand identities violations. In such cases, it is helpful if the brand identities that are being defended are distinct and uncommon. Consequently, brand identities play a major role in the life of a brand.

Exhibit 1

Criteria for choosing brand identities

Criteria

1. Memorability
2. Generalizability
3. Defendability

Including

Meaningfulness

Adaptability

Legal

Competitive

The consumer-product relationship

In product research, it is important to assess the relationship between consumers and products. For instance, the French are highly involved with food while the Americans are highly involved with autos.

Such product-self relationships are often expressed in rituals (such as washing and waxing a car on a regular basis, or making high end restaurant visits an important part of one's life). For a teenager, a car may have many important self-relevant consequences such as self-esteem, envy of peers, and autonomy.

In marketing and research it is important to understand and measure such cognitive and affective aspects rather than simply measuring the functional aspects of a product (eg., gas mileage, acceleration, handling, traction). Just as it is the legitimate function of marketing strategies to create meaningful and effective consumer-product relationships, it is the function of research to measure them.

Market segmentation based on intrinsic self-relevance

Such an understanding of the cognitive aspects of consumer-product relationships can lead to effective segmentation strategies.

One way to understand the relationship between a product and a consumer is to think of it in terms of self-relevance - the way a consumer relates a brand or product to himself or herself.

Self-relevance is of two kinds: intrinsic self-relevance and situational self-relevance. Intrinsic self-relevance refers to the way a consumer relates to a product in a personal way. An example of intrinsic self-relevance is the way a person relates to his or her automobile, as an extension of one's personality. Situational self-relevance is based on environmental relationships such as price, ease of use, and availability.

Exhibit 2

Aspects of self-relevance

- Intrinsic self-relevance
- Situational self-relevance

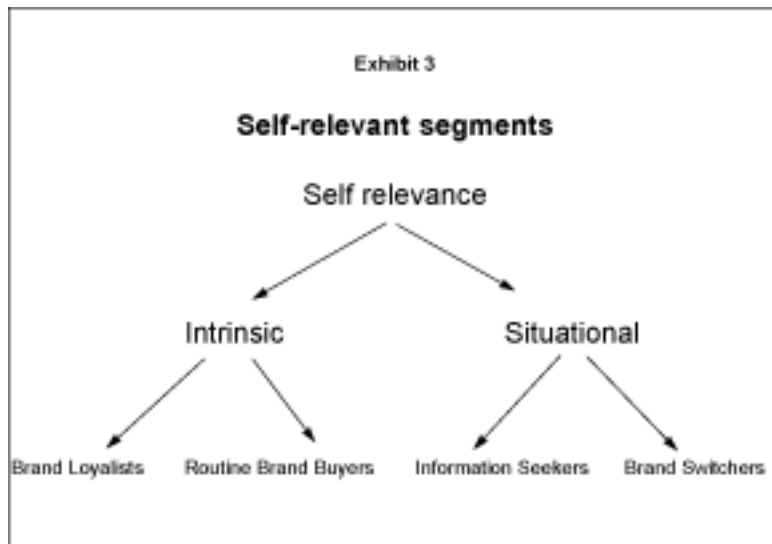
Researchers¹ have identified four levels of intrinsic self-relevance for products and brands: *brand loyalists*,

routine brand buyers, information seekers and brand switchers.

Brand loyalists

Brand loyalists tend to buy a single favorite brand. They have strong affective ties with this one brand. They are very involved with the product category itself. This perception of relevance leads them to experience high levels of involvement in the decision making process. They tend to look for the 'best brand' in the category.

For instance, high automobile brand loyalists (1) have high involvement in the category, automobiles; (2) feel that an automobile has relevant consequences for them, eg., they might feel an automobile expresses their personalities; and (3) as a result of their high involvement, they might spend more time looking for the best brand in the category.



Routine brand buyers

Routine brand buyers have low intrinsic self-relevance for the product category as a whole. However, they do not switch brands frequently - rather they select a brand and buy it on a regular basis. The selection of a brand does not depend on the brand fulfilling a perceived need (as is the case with brand loyalists), but rather on accessibility. While routine brand buyers look for satisfactory brands, they do not spend time looking for the 'best brand'.

Information seekers

Information seekers are knowledgeable, but they do not believe that there is necessarily one 'best' brand. They believe that there are a number of acceptable brands. They usually have a repertoire of acceptable brands from which they choose. Their decisions are likely to be far more based on functionality of a brand or a product rather than any 'meaning' it may have.

Brand switchers

Brand switchers have low self-relevance for brands as well as for the product category itself. Because of this, they do not look for the 'best' brand. Neither are they committed to any single brand. As a result, their decisions are influenced by the environment: accessibility, price, convenience and the like.

Implications for research

These four segments are based on means-ends theory (as exemplified by the laddering technique, discussed in an earlier article in this series). Identifying customers in these segments is a useful marketing exercise, since different types of marketing messages may be needed to reach them as discussed below.

The first two segments - brand loyalists and routine brand buyers - will respond well to communication that reinforces intrinsic self-worth - the 'meaning' of product, and brand.

The remaining two segments - information seekers and brand switchers - will react more positively to situational self-relevance - such as wide availability, price deals, clearance sales etc.

The intrinsic self-relevance segments substantially contribute to brand equity.

1References

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