

••• brand research

Origin story

Deconstructing the building blocks of brand identity

| By Eric Villain



snapshot

Consumers' relationships with brands can run deep. Eric Villain looks at a way to frame and think about those relationships.

As researchers, we often talk about brands in the abstract – their core values, their ideologies and their equity, as if these were currencies that could be traded on the open market. But the truth is that, without a connection to consumers, a brand has nothing that we can discuss or measure. In fact, we could argue that there is no such thing as a brand in the absence of something called a consumer – no story without a reader or an audience.

We also know that the metrics of branding have been static since well before the digital revolution. Concepts like equity and value date back to the 1950s, if not earlier, when the number of brand touchpoints was still definable and consumer interactions with brands happened under predictable conditions – seeing a billboard, watching a TV commercial or encountering a product on store shelves. In fact, one can go way back to the middle ages and look at signage on pubs as an elemental form of branding (prior to widespread literacy).

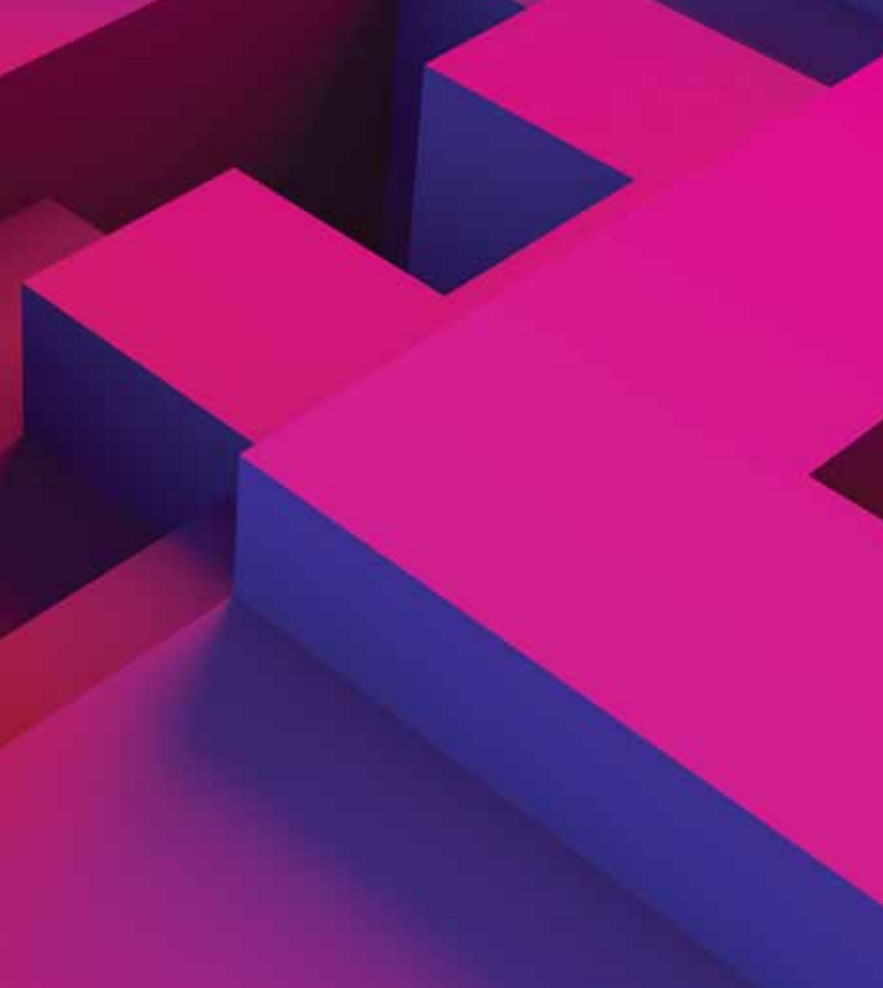
Today, brand and consumer interactions have multiplied to an extent too extreme to get our heads around. Throughout the day, on our phones and laptops and smart speakers, we encounter brands. The line between sponsored and organic content becomes blurrier all the time, as “hidden” product references seep into things we would never consider to be advertising. Our impressions of brands consist now of so many random elements that concepts like equity can seem forced or overly simplified.

To return a level of clarity and practicality to the art of branding and brand measurement, we need to strip away long-held assumptions and return to the true core of brand meaning – the emotional relationship with the consumer. We need to go beyond brand models to understand how brands develop in the first place – the building blocks of brand identity.

Consumers develop a holistic understanding of brands across all



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touchpoints, based on personal experiences, and those experiences collectively lead to a gut feeling about a brand, something seemingly baked into our cells but actually consisting of specific moments of engagement and interaction. Fundamentally, this is our experience economy.

Truly know the brand

This new, instinctual model of branding consists of what we call Brand Dimensions – positive and negative impressions that come before equity in the timeline of brand relationships. Brand Dimensions are difficult to dislodge; once all brand experiences have gelled in consumers' minds and consumers feel they truly know the brand, it can be very difficult to change that perspective.

Consider the case of a long-established car maker – let's use the name ABC – that positioned itself as top-quality and luxury in the 1980s. Ad campaigns, elite sports sponsorships and TV show placements sent the message that ABCs were exclusive and sumptuous, creating hooks in the minds of consumers of every class. The fact that those of us who were alive then were kids and young adults – still impressionable and inexperienced – set the hooks deeper in our psyches.

More recently, however, ABC vehicles have won fewer accolades; rumblings about performance issues have been heard in the market. Yet, for most consumers, the Brand Dimensions that ABC deployed long ago will continue to override any intellectual information that the brand may have dimmed its luster.

This is because Brand Dimensions developed into one overriding construct, lodged in emotion and instinct, not knowledge and discernment. These dimensions are the heartstrings that brands tug on, the roots that reach beneath thinking and connect products to the fiber of consumer identity.

Conversely, consider another imaginary automotive brand – XYZ

– which launched decades ago as a low-cost entry into the marketplace. Even after recent years of quality accolades and product improvement, residual Brand Dimensions still exist. It is taking years for consumers to shed these aspects of brand meaning and see XYZ as a quality vehicle maker.

Part of the thinking around the idea of Brand Dimensions was borrowed from a very different discipline – the pioneering work and publications of neuroscientist Antonio Damasio. To quote Damasio, “We are not thinking machines that feel; rather, we are feeling machines that think.” His concept of “somatic markers” recognizes the important connection between emotion and decision-making. Our point of view is that his theory and work can be applied to how brands develop in our minds and hearts.

Somatic markers – established through reinforcement of key messages and experiences – create a shorthand that is convenient for making choices and decisions. They bypass cognition and direct us toward quicker decisions and seemingly advantageous options. The bias that somatic markers create can be shaped by communication – if we figure out how to hack the marking process.

Similarly, Byron Sharp's seven rules to brand growth – cited in his classic book *How Brands Grow* – place “refreshing and rebuilding memory” at the center of the brand development process. Brand Dimensions are the sources of brand memory and they need to be consistently stimulated and reinforced to maintain solid consumer relationships.

The Brand Dimensions framework starts ahead of traditional brand equity KPIs, peeling down to the thoughts and feelings that make up a brand's impressions. These insights can help brand managers: reinforce positives; adjust communication to combat negatives; and go beyond tracking attributes (which are key yet do not tell enough of the core brand story).

Three categories

We can separate the experiences that leverage Brand Dimensions into three core categories: reinforcing, expanding and dissonant. Let us illustrate them through the story of a hypothetical soft drink manufacturer, Mr. Zing, which has established itself with high-energy, very sweet sodas. Mr. Zing has been around since the 1990s, introducing different flavors but keeping to its guy-focused, hyperactive identity.

Reinforcing experiences are consistent with existing Brand Dimensions, strengthening neural connections and reinforcing existing responses. Mr. Zing does not need to do much to remind people what it stands for – 15-second commercials and six-second Twitter reminders featuring skateboarders and soccer stars reinforce the company's dimensions effectively.

Expanding experiences push the brand to a meaning that is consistent with its image but still refined or enlarged in some way. As the coffee craze kicked in, Mr. Zing introduced a Hyper-Latte that combined espresso flavoring with an extra jolt of caffeine – making its brand more appealing to adults as well as teens.

Dissonant experiences are incongruous with existing dimensions and must overcome them to make an impact. This can involve changing the personality of a brand, what a brand stands for, the look and feel of advertising and connections to distantly related categories.

Mr. Zing decided it could not resist the CBD phenomenon – but the idea of relaxation was completely counter to its established image. To bridge the gap, Mr. Zing introduced a Mellow Meltdown flavor, which featured its

characteristic energetic packaging and messaging but for a product that would “take you to a new high of calm.” But Mr. Zing's Brand Dimensions were too well established and this discordant offering never caught on with consumers.

Getting consumers to talk

The key to uncovering Brand Dimensions is to get consumers to talk about their feelings and experiences with the brand. These results go beyond traditional brand attributes and personality dimensions to which people respond. We can get at these kinds of insights by:

- using projective techniques that reveal underlying territories occupied in the dimensions (usually followed up by why people imagined that brand that way) – generating the thoughts and feelings consumers have about the brand;
- putting consumers in a specific situation where they might experience the brand;
- characterizing the brand through references to people, places or things; and
- having consumers discuss different experiences they have had with the brand – e.g., first experience, best experience and most recent experience.

Through these techniques, we can construct the world in which each brand resides in the consumer's mind.

What can we learn?

So what can we learn from a dimensions view of the marketplace and consumers?


Act carefully when your brand is young. When launching a brand, make

sure your communication is consistent and considered. With digital advertising so affordable, it is tempting to put out a few ideas and see what sticks but this would be a grave error. Communication that does not stick may actually hurt the development of positive dimensions; things that do not produce positive connections may also produce negative ones.

Accentuate the positive. If there are positive connections forming the dimensions, continually reinforce them. Leverage these connections to extend brand meaning into other categories and SKUs.

Be realistic about the challenges of brand shifts. Small brands that have not had strong experiences or communication to form the emotional dimensions of a brand are easier to change and shape. Well-defined brands, while hugely valuable in some ways, are harder to move. A brand with negative dimensions will take time to move – do not be discouraged. Redouble your efforts, keep to your North Star, to your brand vision. Fighting cognitive dissonance takes time and effort.

Monitor your dimensions. You need to understand what makes up your brand meaning and to whom. Has anything slipped into it over time? Have consumers taken your brand to a different territory? (And is that a good thing?)

Above all, respect the power and potential of brands – they are the building blocks of business relevance and are irreplaceable touchstones for consumers. 

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