
Commentary

How participation is changing the practice of managing brands

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ABSTRACT This article argues that branding is changing away from an organization-centric approach to one that is highly participative. The implication of this is that managers need to build networks of participation both internally with employees and externally with consumers and other stakeholders. This heightened connectivity helps bring employees and stakeholders together to develop new insights, create new experiences and reduce risk. The implication of this change is that organizations need to have a clear understanding of their brands, but also a willingness to create the conditions in which others can help mould it. Using illustrative examples of LEGO, Mozilla and adidas, the article shows how some organizations are embracing this spirit of openness, but it also points out that there are challenges in managing brands that have become more fluid and complex.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the last 21 years the *Journal of Brand Management* has delivered something unique in the field of brand strategy and management. With its mixed industry/academic editorial board, it has managed to combine, in its selection of articles, both insightful theory and usable ideas. The journal has become a robust source of reference and inspiration for researchers and educators and a valuable guide for managers who have to make informed choices about the future. In contrast, it seems much brand management

education and many of the standard texts that are used in business schools remain firmly anchored in the past. All too often the practice of brand management, even while adopting new channels and holistic thinking, still resorts to a traditional organization-centric view of consumer behaviour. As a result there is often a dissonance between what managers think consumers do and the reality of how they live, build relationships and use brands (Ind *et al*, 2012). This article draws on earlier research and writing by the author and others to

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challenge the surprisingly robust idea of a one-way, product-focused, marketing communications-led approach to brand building and in its stead offers up a dialogic, service-dominant, participative approach.

PROMISES, PROMISES

The typical perspective on brand building sees it as a process that organizations undertake in a quest to design and deliver something relevant and desirable for consumers. As Aaker (1996) long ago observed, a brand provides functional, emotional and self-expressive benefits. Keller *et al* (2008, p. 3) describe it as a means of differentiating a product from other products ‘designed to satisfy the same needs’, while de Chernatony and McDonald (1998) refer to the idea that a brand is something that is augmented to create relevant added value for the buyer or user. Such definitions are at the heart of what a brand is, but they are also organization-centric views. The brand here is seen as something created by the organization. Market research may inform an organization about stakeholder needs and wants, knowledge absorbed by sales people may guide brand thinking and there may be regular feedback from data collection, but there is often no conscious policy to really tap into the knowledge and creativity of consumers and other stakeholders (Cova *et al*, 2007). Consequently the flow of influence is from the inside out. This orientation is reflected in the models that show the brand building process as a horizontal movement from the organization to the stakeholder (for example, Ind, 2001). The widely held idea that a brand is a promise is rooted in this premise. An organization makes a brand promise when it makes a claim that it will do something, which it then tries to support through the reality of what it delivers. A brand promise may imply a contractual obligation, but it is what Hume (1969, p. 541) would call a convention,

which he sees as more profound than a contract. In making a promise an individual or organization creates an obligation (Hume sees this transference from utterance to commitment as something mysterious, like *transubstantiation*) and in the eyes of the receiver, creates an expectation, which if proven by experience, can lead to trust. However, the idea of a brand as a promise is flawed in the sense that it is not solely the brand owner that determines the brand experience. The brand may come laden with messages and associations designed by the organization, but the receptivity of those messages will be variable and the value-in-use will be determined largely by the stakeholder (Grönroos, 2011); ‘by consumers who create relations, emotions and communities around brands’ independent of the organization (Kornberger, 2010, p. 248). As Hume notes, a promise must be rooted in practice – in other words a promise is fulfilled in action. The use of the word ‘promise’ therefore seems over-emphatic because it is not within the realm of the organization to keep a brand promise without the participation of the stakeholder. A brand therefore is less a promise and more akin, from an organizational perspective, to the principle of a covenant in American Contract Law, which carries with it an implication of fair dealing and good faith – although we should note there is much debate as to the real meaning and application of the latter term among legal thinkers (Dubroff, 2006).

The organizational orientation to brand thinking is not in itself surprising. Managers see a brand in terms of what they can do to it – how can they augment it, to make it more appealing for consumers – while researchers usually complete their papers with the implications of their analysis for management actions. Most brand management books are exactly that – ‘how to’ books that describe what can be managed in what way. Indeed, without this orientation

there would be little reason for such books to exist. However, what the organizational orientation also does is sometimes blind managers and researchers to the need for an approach that sees branding as a process that sits at the intersection of the stakeholder and the organization, rather than the exclusive domain of the organization. This literal shift of perspective should draw us away from those linear models of brand building that we read left to right to a birds eye model, where we see the interaction from above as stakeholders and the organization connect continuously. This change presents branding as a social and more organic process involving both insiders and outsiders (Brodie *et al*, 2009; Hatch and Schultz, 2010; Iglesias *et al*, 2013). Here the organization offers ‘an implied covenant of good faith and fair dealing’, but brand meaning itself is derived through conversation and negotiation (Round and Roper, 2012) (Figure 1).

brand image was determined largely by one-way marketing communications. Yet they still enjoy a powerful influence if they choose to become participatory; to listen, observe and converse with a brand’s stakeholders. Over the last decade there has been a fundamental shift in behaviour towards a more participatory culture where it has become the norm for individuals to share knowledge, present opinions and contribute to ‘the objects of our world’ (de Vugt, 2010). People are no longer the objectified and largely passive target markets of the past, but rather active contributors to open source branding (Fournier and Avery, 2011). They are searchers and researchers, community builders, content providers and brand co-creators (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001; Hatch and Schultz, 2010; Ind *et al*, 2013). Individuals make YouTube films, create online communities for the brands they love, provide reviews for books, hotels and restaurants, help define the meaning of ideas on Wikipedia and support cultural and product innovations through crowd funding schemes. Mostly individuals take part in these practices because they have a desire to

A PARTICIPATIVE APPROACH

Managers no longer have control over their brands in the way that they used to when

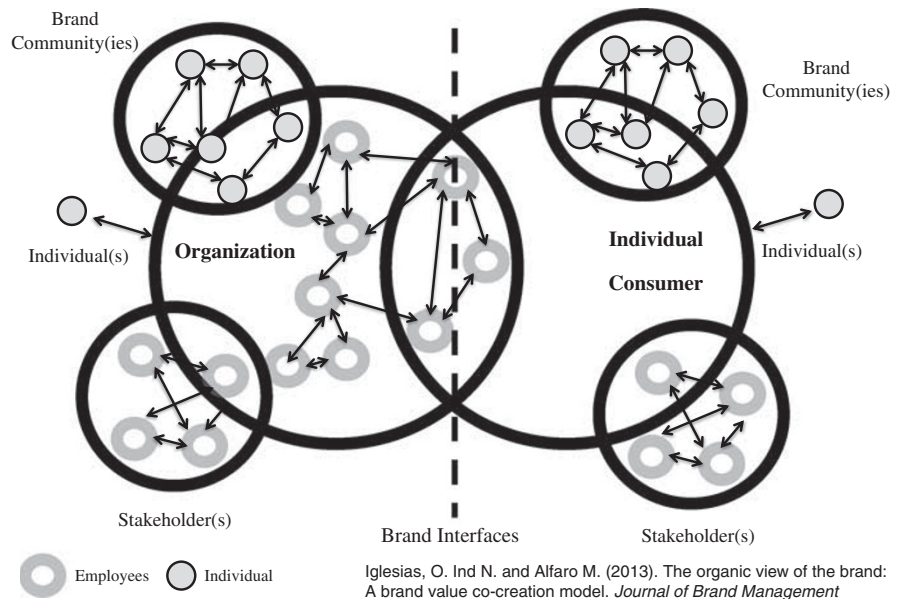


Figure 1: A bird's eye view of the brand.

socialize, be self-expressive and to learn. Even when communities are established by organizations the primary motivations for consumers are intrinsic (Füller, 2010). Through participation people start to feel a sense of proximity and brand ownership (Ind *et al*, 2013), even to the extent of beginning to act like employees, ‘The more the customer is involved in the process of service production and delivery, the greater the perceived value and satisfaction ... Consumers (as individuals and as a group of interacting subjects) become partial employees and employees become partial consumers’ (Cova and Dalli, 2010).

The implication of heightened participation on the outside is that it fosters a need for participation on the inside. As managers lose control over their brands, they have to instead nurture relationships with external stakeholders and facilitate stakeholder connections with employees. This requires managers to think about how they build networks that both share internal knowledge and involve consumers and other audiences (Gouillart, 2014). The opening up of the organization and the building of brand ecosystems requires functional adaptation but also a change of perception. Managers have to look at consumers as equals and be willing to extend their ‘sympathy for others’ (Hume, 1969). As the boundaries of the firm begin to dissipate, the culture has to embrace outsiders (Kornberger, 2010a). This change means managers have to be good listeners, demonstrate humility and ideally become mavens – individuals possessed of social skills, knowledge and a willingness to share (Gladwell, 2000). In practical terms this means building online communities with stakeholders, involving entrepreneurs and universities in events, sharing expertise as widely as possible and encouraging managers and employees to have direct contact with external audiences. When employees are given the opportunity to connect with

customers, they both humanize the brand (Morhart *et al*, 2009) and create powerful experiences for customers (Gelb and Rangarajan, 2014). As King and Grace (2008) note, ‘There is a link between employees being provided with customer/market information and employee perception as to the extent to which the organisation values employee contribution’.

CONNECTING THE ORGANIZATION: THE CASE OF LEGO

LEGO’s discovery of the value of participation is well-documented (Schultz and Hatch, 2003; Antorini, 2007; Hatch and Schultz, 2008; Kornberger, 2010; Robertson and Breen, 2013). It emerged accidentally as a result of the launch of Mindstorms – a set of programmable bricks aimed at a teenage market. LEGO, which had begun to be seen as ‘dusty’ by young people compared with computer games, had sought a cure in new product innovation. However LEGO’s attempts to innovate were hindered by a lack of clear direction. Nonetheless, Mindstorms felt right in that it was rooted in the traditional LEGO brick and the idea of a system of play and offered something to those who enjoyed the interaction of gaming. It sold well from the outset, but as LEGO began to discover, many of its buyers were not teenagers, but adult technologists and computer scientists. These buyers quickly hacked the software code, shared it with each other and started to create new applications that went well beyond what LEGO’s developers had originally envisaged. Brought up with a traditional view of intellectual property, LEGO managers initially saw this as a threat, but they also understood that it felt wrong to take legal action against your consumers. For a while inertia set in, until LEGO decided to start meeting with these individuals. Beyond the boundaries of the organization it discovered a world of AFOLs (Adult Friends of LEGO), Brickfests and online fan communities.

Once managers engaged, LEGO saw the opportunity to learn and they decided to give Mindstorms users a licence to hack. The company started to move from a closed approach to innovation to an open one. When the next variant of Mindstorms was planned (Mindstorms NXT), LEGO decided it would invite a small group of its hackers to be the co-developers. These individuals came to Billund, Denmark and then worked with LEGO engineers on the concept. Further along more hackers were invited to refine the product idea.

The serendipitous discovery of the value of participation means that LEGO managers and employees have become closely connected to customers. LEGO has opened itself up and welcomes initiatives from innovators, such as the UK-based Minifigs that have taken a core LEGO product – Minifigures – and built an independent business around tailored characters and Brickfilms.com, an online community that supports the creation of the thousands of stop-motion animated films on YouTube. Also independent of the company are the many online AFOL communities, the best known of which is LUGNET, and user organized events. LEGO understands its role here as listening, connecting and supporting. The communities and events are not run by LEGO, so it would be wrong if the company tried to control these in some way, but there is a real opportunity for LEGO's people to learn by taking part as participants on an equal footing. LEGO tries to further nurture the fan connection through its Ambassador programme. It could of course have appointed ambassadors from among its employees, but that would have felt intrusive. Instead, ambassadors are fans who take on the role of helping to strengthen the connection between LEGO and AFOLs.

Where LEGO can be more directional is in the initiatives that it institutes. When LEGO establishes communities or groups to

tackle a particular issue or opportunity, it can pose questions and steer the discussion. Similarly when it asks customers to generate new product ideas, it can set the ground rules for the process and idea acceptance. Within an overall goal of systemic creativity, LEGO recognizes that it must adapt its approach in tune with the nature of the relationship between the organization and its stakeholders. As Robertson and Breen (2013) note, 'LEGO came to realize that while open source innovation can be managed, it can't be controlled ... Like any good dialogue, LEGO style sourcing was built on the principles of mutual respect, each side's willingness to listen, a clear sense of what's in play, and what's out of bounds, and a strong desire for a mutually beneficial outcome'.

BLURRING BOUNDARIES

The very idea of an organization is that it brings individuals together to create something larger than themselves through the development of a collective idea based around a certain culture or outlook (Williams, 2002). This suggests the setting of boundaries that define who is an organizational member and who is not and an ideological framework that helps to connect people (Debray, 2000, p. 94) and perhaps meet their 'existential needs for meaning, belonging and even immortality' (Whetten and Godfrey, 1998, p. 268). Organizations thus have an independent existence, over and above the individuals that comprise them (Delanda, 2006, p. 38). Yet, while organizations do have entitativity and structure, their boundaries are increasingly fluid as outsiders are either invited to participate or simply seize the opportunity for themselves. LEGO has had to learn how to adapt its culture to involve outsiders, but others, such as Mozilla have always blurred the boundaries between the inside and the outside (Ind *et al*, 2012). For Mozilla (the producers of Firefox and Thunderbird) the

principle of openness is core to the culture. Mozilla was a project that grew out of Netscape with the purpose of keeping the Internet 'free, open and accessible to all'. With limited internal resources and a powerful set of competitors, Mozilla chose from the outset to encourage employees and non-employees to participate together in writing software, creating new features, fixing bugs, translating content and marketing the brand. Product features, such as tabbed browsing, pop-up blocking and session restore were all created by volunteers. The idea of disability access for people with visual impairment was a project initiated and led by a volunteer who had a disabled family member. The commitment of volunteers even extends to financial support. When Firefox 1.0 was launched, Mozilla did not have the funds for a communications campaign, so it asked its fans for the money. The first double page spread in the *New York Times* in 2004 includes one page featuring the Firefox logo made out of a pattern of all the names of the people who contributed.

Although Mozilla is changing as it grows (in 2013 it employed approximately 1000 people in nine offices) and becoming more structured, there is still the commitment to the unifying idea of openness. Projects often mix employees and volunteers together – even with volunteers in the lead, while product marketing relies extensively on the participation of thousands of volunteers around the world. The willingness to mix insiders and outsiders together creates the opportunity to take advantage of cognitive diversity and for people to learn from each other. This means that Mozilla largely evolves organically in tune with the needs of its users. Mozilla still maintains influence over the direction of its brands but it does not seek to control them. Rather it allows meaning to emerge from the on-going dialogue between its internal and external constituents, who are wedded together by the overarching commitment to the principle of openness.

TURNING INWARDS

The power of Mozilla derives from its networks that flow across organizational boundaries. It typifies the philosophy of open source organizations and their underlying principle of sharing. Yet as the boundaries blur between the inside and the outside, the need for openness becomes more important for all organizations. The prevalence of social media in the lives of people and its widespread usage as a communication and interaction tool by brand owners means the number of touchpoints between an organization and its publics has grown significantly (Mangold and Faulds, 2009). It is no longer viable for organizations to rely on a select few individuals to be the face of the organization. Rather, organizations have to liberate their people and encourage them to participate in social media discussions, to express their views on blogs and meet customers face-to-face. This requires organizations to both engage their people with the brand, so that they have the opportunity to reflect its meaning in their dialogues and to trust employees to do the right thing most of the time. When organizations have the confidence to do this, it builds a feeling of connection for insiders and outsiders. Consumers appreciate this because when they contribute their thoughts and creativity to an organization they anticipate feedback – and are disappointed if this does not happen (Ind *et al*, 2013). In turn, employees are motivated by the sense of creating value for others. In their in-depth study of 14 German brands, Burmann *et al* (2009) make this link explicit by showing the causal relationships between brand commitment, brand citizenship behaviours (those behaviours outside of their defined roles that strengthen brand identity) and the quality of brand–customer relationships.

The implication here is twofold. First, employees need to understand and engage with the brand. It has to acquire relevant meaning for them. This will always be easier

to achieve if employees participate not only in delivering the brand idea, but also in its definition. When employees are given the opportunity to define a brand, it is not only an expression of organizational trust but also an opportunity for self-discovery. Individuals then find contextual meaning in the words as they are discussed and agreed. As the management pioneer Mary Parker Follett observed, 'the essential feature of a common thought is not that it is held in common but that it has been produced in common' (Graham, 1995, p. 20). Once an idea has been defined it then needs to be lived, not just by those charged with brand stewardship but by the whole organization. Again this cannot be mandated by leadership, but leaders do have a vital role in demonstrating to others the value of a brand idea (Harris, 2007; King and Grace, 2008; Morhart *et al.*, 2009). It is the commitment over time to adhering to the values in decision making that gives a brand substance.

Second, employees have to be liberated. As Hatch and Schultz (2008, p. 17) suggest, 'stop asking how you can get your employees behind the brand and start thinking about how you can put the brand your employees'. If employees are to connect with external stakeholders, they ideally should reflect the brand in their behaviour, but organizations also need to pay attention to enhancing the knowledge and skills of their employees, so that they become more valuable links in the network of connections inside and outside. This becomes particularly relevant as organizations come to be staffed and led by Generation Y individuals born between 1981 and 2000 and their subset of Generation C (born after 1990), whom Friedrich *et al.*, (2011) describe as connected, communicating, content-centric, computerized, community-oriented and always clicking. These individuals are digital natives. They have grown up with technology and look to connect with often large networks through a variety

of platforms. They are participative and comfortable expressing opinions and ideas and sharing experiences with others.

At the sportswear brand, adidas, where 64 per cent of the workforce are Generation Y, there is an appreciation that employees are often networked to each other and to a raft of external stakeholders. Many of these employees are at a formative stage of their careers and are keen to learn and develop. In the past there was a rather formalized approach to education based on the perceived needs of the individual. Now adidas has moved to a more collaborative and social learning model where people are free to choose what they want to learn about. Learning is about absorbing information imparted by experts, but it is also about peer-to-peer learning, connections into third party content, good feedback and the opportunity to create for others as well as consume. In this way, participants are both learners and teachers. This learning philosophy certainly benefits the individual and their quest for self-fulfilment, but the benefits to adidas are also significant. The organization understands that it needs to offer this opportunity to attract and retain talent and to enable adidas people to better represent the brand.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The people-centric and participative approach to brand building impacts on how external stakeholders experience brands and how managers and employees think and act. It creates a relationship that is more equal between brand owners and stakeholders as they become partners in a network of common interest. It affords stakeholders the opportunity to have their say about brands (albeit what they say may not always be positive) and to contribute to how brands grow and develop – something that brand owners should nurture if they want to promote consumer passion (Hemetsberger, 2014).

The fundamental shift going on here is to make external stakeholders more like insiders – privy to company information, trusted to be able to contribute to the brand and valued as brand advocates who take on roles previously undertaken by employees. This connectivity helps companies to become closer to their stakeholders and to generate faster and better insights (Ind *et al*, 2012).

However, this participative approach is not always comfortable for organizations that can remain stubbornly focused on their own expertise even while paying lip service to the contributions external stakeholders, and consumers in particular, can make to a brand. Clearly, an organization can benefit from the contributions of others both in developing new ideas and reducing risk, but there is also the risk of tension as the commercial interests of the organization confront the intrinsic motivations of consumers and as stakeholders either resist change or push the brand in unwanted directions (Sjödin, 2006; Kornberger, 2010; Sjödin, 2012). The implication here is that companies need to have real clarity about their brand proposition, if they are to let go and allow it to evolve organically (Iglesias *et al*, 2013). Interestingly alongside LEGO's involvement of external stakeholders in developing the LEGO offer through the introduction of products, such as LEGO architecture and Mindstorms NXT, was a renewed commitment to the ideas of quality and a system of play that were rooted in the company's past and a reaffirmation of its brand values. Similarly with Mozilla and adidas, the ability to encourage participation and yet not lose a sense of unity, derives from the cohesion that the brand provides.

Participation does not abrogate the company's influence over, or responsibility for, the brand. Managers are still required to make choices and to set direction, but they also have to be adaptive as brand meaning is not fixed, but rather evolves constantly through experience (Iglesias and Bonet, 2012).

This means managers have to cope with a new brand fluidity and complexity and reject the temptation to control or manipulate (Fournier and Avery, 2011). This represents a significant challenge. It can be difficult enough marshalling the ideas and opinions of colleagues, let alone extensive internal and external networks of stakeholders. Yet the connectivity between employees and between employees and consumers has already happened. Control of the brand has already diminished (Kornberger, 2010a). Consequently, brand managers have to leave behind the fixed models they learned and embrace a more fuzzy future where they can participate together with others.

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