



MAXIMIZING BRAND EXPOSURE IN THE 21ST CENTURY; BRANDING AS A STRATEGY FOR CREATING COMPETITIVE EDGE

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Abstract

This paper examines branding as a marketing concept and how organizations can explore it for creating competitive advantage. It defines branding and explores the various aspects that organizations can pay attention to, in marketing either their products or services, in making their brands distinct. Product features and benefits, company logos, corporate wear, unique ambience and exquisite office furniture are some among the key aspects that various organizations can exploit to create cutting edge brands that would distinguish their organizations, products and services from the rest of the players in their respective industries. Branding objectives, elements of branding, types of brands, branding strategies and principles of brand strategy are the key concepts covered in this paper. The use of social media in exposing your brand is also discussed in this paper.

Introduction

According to the American Marketing Association (AMA) a brand is a "name, term, sign, symbol or design, or a combination of them intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of other sellers." Kotler (2003) who also quotes the AMA definition calls a brand "an offering from a known source" and further asserts that branding is the art and cornerstone of marketing. A brand is a distinctive, recognizable mark or symbol of identity that distinguishes a product or a service from the rest of the products or services on the market. It is the idea or image of a specific product or service that consumers connect with, by identifying the name, logo, slogan, or design of the company who owns the idea or image. Branding is when that idea or image is marketed so that it is recognizable by more and more people, and identified with a certain service or product when there are many other companies offering the same service or product. Anholt, (2009) distinguishes a brand from branding as follows; a brand is a product, service or organization considered in relation to its name, identity and reputation, while branding is the process of creating, planning and communicating a name and identity for the purpose of building or managing a reputation.

Cetinski et al. (2006) intimate that branding is a marketing and managerial process by which a specific product/service is given a unique identity and image to make it distinctive and differentiate it from the product/service of a competitor. The following are some of the critical element of successful branding (Skoko, 2009): -

1. Reinforcing the distinctiveness of the product/service's identity and improving its image,
2. Building future identity,
3. Making promises and having the ability to deliver promises to end consumers in accordance with how they experience a brand,
4. Giving an object a "soul" and bringing it to life in the minds of consumers,
5. Generating and adding value by creating a brand's emotional (intangible) and functional (tangible) attributes,
6. Creating unique emotional associations or attachments, and
7. Entering the mind of consumers and creating qualitative differences relative to the competition.

One of the important aspects in branding is brand positioning, which is the process of creating a brand offering in such a manner that it occupies a distinctive place and value in the target customers mind. Thompson (2003) lists four basic characteristics of brand positioning; relevance, diversity, credibility and flexibility. Anholt (2009) identifies another set of four aspects of a brand, which are also key: identity, image, purpose and market value.

What makes a brand distinct?

The use of company logos on all products, correspondence (letterheads), business cards, compliment slips creates and sustains brand awareness. In addition, it is also very important to brand your corporate wear; shirts, ties, chiffons, scuffs, vehicles, buildings and anything and everything that identifies you as an organization.

Unique ambience, exquisite office furniture, and classy arrangement of furniture and fittings within a business premise also contribute towards maximizing your brand exposure. This is very evident with a number of financial institutions on the Zimbabwean market; Banc ABC, MBCA, Ecobank, CABS Platinum to mention just but a few.



The human factor is another very important aspect of brand exposure. Marketers are brand ambassadors and wherever they are, they will be representing their organization, its products and/or services. How they conduct themselves in the market place therefore makes a statement about the brands that they represent. Professional outlook and decorous etiquette and conduct within the market space are also consistent with unique brand exposure. Despicable conduct on the other hand works against your brand as consumers would not normally like to associate with brands that risk them being viewed in a manner that brings about disrepute. In recent years, some organizations have adopted the use of “brand ambassadors” who are celebrities or public personalities that they engage to carry their brand into the market place. On the Zimbabwean market, musicians have largely been used by various organizations as brand ambassadors, for example Sandra Ndebele who is the brand ambassador for Mpilo Central Hospital and Oliver Mutukudzi who is brand ambassador for Boom Washing Powder.

Branding objectives

Lake (2014) asserts that in determining brand objectives, one needs to ascertain what it is that they want their brand to do for their company and what they want others to know and say about their products or services. She further intimates that branding is not about getting your target market to choose you over your competitors, but it is about getting your prospects to see you as the only one that provides a solution to their problem. The objectives that a good brand will achieve include:

1. Delivers your message clearly to your customers and prospects
2. Confirms your credibility as a consistent provider of solutions to your customers’ needs
3. Connects your target prospects emotionally
4. Motivates your buyers to consistently buy your product
5. Concretizes User Loyalty

Successful branding requires you to understand the needs and wants of your customers and prospects. This can be achieved through integrating your brand strategies throughout all your company activities and at every point of public contact. A brand should ideally reside within the hearts and minds of customers, clients, and prospects. It is the sum total of their experiences and perceptions, some of which you can influence, and some that you cannot. A strong brand is therefore invaluable in creating competitive advantage as the battle for customers intensifies day by day. It is important to spend time investing in researching, defining, and building your brand. A unique brand is a foundational piece in your marketing communication and as such it is important to ensure that it distinctly communicates what you intend to communicate about your organization, products and/or services to your target market.

Elements of Branding

Brands are developed to target customers’ needs and preferences and include elements such as brand names, trade names, brand marks, trade characters and trademarks. These elements are often combined to form a company’s corporate symbol or name. Effective brands often become global, appealing to consumers beyond cultural or political boundaries. Some of the renowned global brands include Coca-Cola, Nike, McDonald’s, Ford and Mercedes Benz.

Brand names – this could be a word, group of words, letters or numbers that represent a product or service. The brand name, also called a product brand, is what the product is called by the consumers in the market. It can be words, like Gold Medal or Bisquick, or it can be numbers and letters, like VO5 shampoo or O3 mineral water. It should be easy to pronounce, distinctive and recognizable. Other brand names include Barbie, Pop-Tarts and Big Mac. Brand names do not necessarily need to relate at all to the company names that own them.

Brand marks – a unique symbol, design or distinct coloring or lettering that is part of the brand. A brand mark is usually recognizable and does not need to be pronounced. For example Nike’s brand mark (swoosh), McDonald’s brand mark (golden arches) and Ford’s brand mark (the word ‘ford’ in stylish font in an oval shape with a blue border). The brand mark could have the brand name or trade name on it. Companies diligently develop consumer awareness and identification with their brand marks.

Trade characters - a personified brand mark; one that is given human form or characteristics. It is a specific type of brand element, with a human character, for example, McDonald’s trade character, which captures Ronald McDonald’s portrait. Other trade characters include Burger King (the King), Frosted Flakes (Tony the Tiger) and Green Giant (Jolly Green Giant).

Trademarks - a brand name, brand mark, trade character, or a combination of these that is that is officially registered and given legal protection, and carries the registered trademark symbol: ®. Trademarks are used to prevent other companies from using a similar element that might be confused with the trademarked one. For example, the image of the golden arches is a McDonald’s trademark and no other company can use this symbol. The Patent and Trademark Office grants trademark rights to companies, which preclude other companies from using the same brand name, brand mark, trade character, or a combination of these elements of branding.

Trade names – a word, combinations of letters and numbers or name that identifies the company or a division of a particular corporation. The trade name is also called corporate brand. The trade name is what a company uses when it does business, and is used to promote a positive image of the organization, such as quality, value, and reliability and supports the product brands



offered by the company. For example, Kellogg is the trade name that supports the Frosted Flakes, Rice Krispies, and Pop-Tarts that the company markets. CBZ Bank Limited uses the Jewel Bank as a trade name, which signifies quality of service and value for money to the clients. Other examples of trade names would be Ford, Chrysler or General Motors.

Types of brands

Manufacturers, wholesalers and retailers brand their organizations, their products and services to make them distinct from competition. As a result, there are 3 core classifications of brands, one for each type of company that brands its products – national brands, private distributor brands and generic brands. The advent of electronic commerce has facilitated the emergence of a fourth classification of brand; the Internet brand.

1. **National brands:** National brands, also called manufacturer or producer brands, are owned and initiated by national manufacturers or by companies that provide services. Examples of national brands for consumer goods include Hershey Foods, Colgate-Palmolive, Whirlpool, and Ford. Examples of service companies that generate national brands are Northwest Airlines, Hilton, Avis, and Bank of America. National brands are the largest category, generating most of the sales of all types of brands; 70% of all food products, 65% of all appliances, 80% of all petroleum products and 100% of all automobiles are sold under national brands. National brands sell the most because they constitute the majority of brands that are on the market, they are recognized, and they are trusted.
2. **Private distributor brand:** This is a brand name established and owned by wholesalers and retailers to compete with national brands. They tend to be more profitable, yet exclusive to the store that initiated the brand. Private distributor brands are also called private label brands or store brands. Since they are initiated and owned by the distributor, the manufacturer's name does not appear on the product. Many large supermarket and retail chains have private distributor brands. Some examples of private distributor brands on the Zimbabwean market are OK's Pot Ó Gold brands and TM's Super Saver brands. Private distributor brands appeal to customers who desire the quality and performance of national brands at a lower price. They are popular with the distributors because they usually carry higher gross margins and thus are more profitable for the seller than manufacturer brands. In addition, considering that private brands cannot be sold at competitors' stores, they help cultivate customer loyalty.
3. **Generic brands:** Generic brands are products that don't carry a company identity. The packaging for generic products usually features a description of the product, such as "pancake mix" or "paper towels". Generic brands are generally sold in supermarkets and discount stores and are priced 30-50% lower than manufacturer brands and 10-15% lower than private distributor brands. Companies that manufacture and sell generic brands do not heavily advertise or promote these products, which lowers costs, passing on savings to customers.
4. **Internet brands:** Electronic commerce has created a new category of brand; the Internet brand. There are Internet brands for both consumer products and services. Examples of Internet consumer product brands include Amazon.com, eBay, Monster, Google and Yahoo.

Branding Strategies

Companies develop and rely on a variety of branding strategies to meet sales and company objectives. Some of these strategies include brand extensions, brand licensing, mixed branding and co-branding. Effective use of different brand strategies can increase sales of branded products and maximize company profits. Below is a closer look at these branding strategies.

Brand extension: brand extension is a branding strategy that uses an existing brand name to promote a new or improved product in a company's product line. For example when Coca Cola introduced its Minute Maid Brand of fruit juices, it started off with Minute Maid Pulpy and then extended its Minute Maid juice product line by adding flavors, including Mango Apple, Tropical, Orange and Fruit Blend. Launching new products is costly, and the failure rate for new products is high. Companies can sometimes reduce this risk by using a brand name that is established. However, there is a downside to using brand extension as this may result in brand dilution, a situation where the original brand loses the strength of its brand identity when it encompasses too many products. If a company is not careful, they could expand too much, going into products that are not related in the consumers' minds, and the brand loses its strength. Successful brands like the Vicks line of medicines have maintained a strong identity because Proctor & Gamble has made sure that all products with Vicks brand can be identified with cold medicines.

Brand licensing: Brand licensing is the legal authorization to allow another company to use its brand for a fee. Some companies allow other organizations to use their brand (name, mark or character) for a fee, but in the process maximizing their brand exposure. Disney, for example licenses its brand to Kellogg and both companies win as on one hand Kellogg gets a cereal with an identifiable trade character such as Mickey Mouse, Buzz Lightyear, and Winnie the Pooh, while on the other hand Disney gets paid for the use of these trade characters.

Co-branding: Co-branding is similar to licensing, but instead of one company paying another for the use of its brand, both companies partner to create a product that benefits both. In the co-branding strategy, two or more brands are combined in the manufacture of a product or in the delivery of a service. This strategy enables companies to capitalize on the popularity of other



companies' products to reach new customers, and, ideally, to increase sales for both companies' brands. For example, Kellogg's Pop-Tarts are made with Smucker's fruit filling, wherein Kellogg's buys the filling from Smucker's and promotes its use in the Pop-tarts. Co-branding can also work when two or more retailers share the same location.

Mixed brands: Mixed brands entails offering national, private label and generic brands at the same time to reach more than one target market, maintain brand loyalty and increase the overall product mix offering to your target market. Some companies, especially retailers, use the mixed brand strategy. They offer more than one type of brand so they are better able to reach multiple markets. By offering national brands, they target the consumers who are loyal to known brands and the perception of quality that goes with it, and they can target the value-conscious consumer who is looking for the bargain through private label or generic brands. A mixed-brand strategy enables a business to maintain brand loyalty through its national brand to reach several different target markets through private brands, thus increasing its overall product mix. It can maximize its profits by selling a private brand product without damaging the reputation and the sales of its national brand product. For example Michelin, manufactures its own brand of tyres as well as tyres for sale at Sears under the Sears brand name.

The 12 principles of branding strategy

Tsai (2014) shares 12 principles which he asserts organizations should observe when pursuing their branding strategies. He further intimates that, where one is selling to multiple personalities, it would be ideal to first connect everyone on a common ground then articulate clearly what is in it for each of them, the primary objective being to stimulate an engaging conversation that allows you to change perception, diagnose expectations and bring clarity to the dialogue. The essence of developing a brand strategy is therefore laying the foundation of your communication that builds authentic relationships between you and your audience. Defining your brand strategy allows you to utilize marketing, advertising, public relations and social media to consistently and accurately reinforce your character as an organization and the character of your product and/or service. Failure to effectively define your core strategy can result in you pursuing the wrong channels of communication, wrong media for your target market and significantly dent your brand. Below is a summarized version of what Tsai (2014) identified as the 12 brand strategy principles that are key to achieving business success through effective branding.

1. **Define your brand** - focus on what you do best and then communicate your inimitable strengths through consistency. Be clear on authenticity, core purpose, vision, mission, position, values and character.
2. **Your brand is your business model** - support and challenge your business model to maximize the potential within your brand. Personal brands like Oprah, Donald Trump, Martha Stewart and Richard Branson have practically built their business right on top of their personal brand; everything they offer is an extension of their brand promise.
3. **Consistency, consistency, consistency** - consistency in your message is the key to differentiate your product or service. BMW has always been known as the "*ultimate driving machine*."
4. **Start from the Inside out** - everyone in your company can tell you what they see, think and feel about your brand. That's the story you should bring to the customers as well, drive impact beyond just the *walls of marketing*.
5. **Connect on the emotional level** - a brand is not a name, logo, website, ad campaigns or PR; those are only the tools not the brand. **A brand is a desirable idea manifested in products, services, people, places and experiences.** Sell customers something that satisfies not only their physical needs but their emotional needs and their need to identify themselves with your brand.
6. **Empower brand champions** - award those that love your brand to help drive the message, and facilitate brand awareness activities so they can be part of the process. If your brand advocate doesn't tell you what you should or should not be doing, it's time to evaluate your brand promise.
7. **Stay relevant and flexible** - a well-managed brand is always responsive to changes in customer preferences and market trends; making adjustments to meet and sometimes surpass customer expectations. Branding is a process that requires you to constantly tweak your message and refresh your image.
8. **Align tactics with strategy** - convey the brand message on the most appropriate media platform with specific campaign objectives. Invest your branding efforts on the right platform that communicates through the right channels. Television may be expensive but it has a broader reach, wider demographics and can produce instant impact. On the other hand, social media may seem cheap but it takes time, resources and may not give you the desired outcome.
9. **Measure the effectiveness** - focus on the return on investment (**ROI**) as the key to measure the effectiveness of your strategies. This could be reflected in brand valuation or how your customers react to your product and price adjustments, and should resonate with sales and that that translate into profitability.
10. **Cultivate your community** - community is a powerful and effective platform on which to engage customers and create loyalty towards the brand. In an active community, members feel a need to connect with each other in the context of the brand's consumption. Brand communities allow companies to collaborate with customers in all phases of value creation via crowdsourcing such as product design, pricing strategy, availability, and even how to sell.
11. **Keep your enemies closer** - even if you have the most innovative, highly desirable product, you can expect new competitors with a superior value proposition to enter your market and pose a threat to your brand. The market is always big enough for



new players to improve what you deliver *better, faster, cheaper*. Competition could be good in that it challenges your brand to elevate the strategy and deliver more value, hence the need to keep your pulse on competitor activity.

12. **Practice brand strategy thinking** – this entails thinking outside the box without being limited by the traditional strategies that have worked in the past. This concept actually applies to your brand strategy creation process that Tsai (2014) has coined “*brand strategy thinking*.” Continuously endeavor to come up with new, original and creative brand strategies rather than emulating what worked for your competitor. Leverage the *ecosystem* that includes your employees, partners and customers to help you articulate your brand strategy in a different but effective way, relevant to the environment and your target market.

An effective brand strategy will bring clarity and meaning to your brand so you can focus on making, creating, and selling things that your customers actually value. Successfully crafting and implementing a brand strategy results in your brand being unique, memorable and esteemed.

Product features and benefits

The uniqueness of a product’s features and benefits to the target market also speaks volumes in maximizing brand exposure. A lot of organizations come into a market where established brands exist and they introduce products that have very basic and standard features that are not in any way distinct from the rest. What can make your brand stand out instead is innovation on your part in coming up with a added feature to the generic product, which gives your client added value, without them paying so much more. A few organizations have been able to do this on the local market where for example detergent manufacturers have added a fabric softener to washing powder so that customers now no longer need to buy fabric softeners separately. Vehicle manufacturers are also good at this, where features like individual temperature control for each seat, biometric ignitions and cameras and sensors for facilitating safe reversing of vehicles have been added to certain vehicle brands, making them distinct from the rest of the vehicles on the market.

The use of social media in exposing your brand

In this information age, it is important that we make efforts to expose our brand to existing and potential markets through the social media. As a brand you need to have your presence on platforms like Face book, Yu Tube, Twitter, LinkedIn, and many other similar platforms. This is with the appreciation that most people that constitute our target market now have access to the internet through a variety of mobile devices and interact quite frequently through this media. Creating a Face book page, for example will go a long way in exposing your brand. The choice of media is however very important as some sites have been viewed to be too social while others have a business-like approach.

Conclusion

In a highly competitive environment, where the market continues to shrink due to low levels of capacity utilization, very low disposable incomes and stiff competition from foreign players, branding becomes critical as a factor that organizations can capitalize on to create competitive advantage. Where there is very limited income, customers tend to make concerted efforts to spend every dollar wisely and maximize utility. In the process, they endeavour to go for the brands that evidently meet and/or exceed their expectations.

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