

Brand association

[Business](#), [Company](#)



BRAND ASSOCIATIONS AND CONSUMER PERCEPTIONS OF VALUE OF PRODUCTS BY NZUKI KITHUNG'A PETER UNIVERSITY OF NAIROBI PAPER PRESENTED TO SUPPLY OF ACADEMIC PUBLICATIONS (SAP) CONTENTS Page 1. Background Meaning of a brand and Its Importance 2. Theoretical Framework on Brand Associations Perceptual Dimensions of Brand Associations Brand Associations and Value Creation Brand Association and Value Creation Model 3. Measurement of Brand Associations Less Structured Approaches Structured Approaches 4.

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A successful brand is the most valuable resource a company has. In fact, one authority speculates that brands are so valuable that companies will soon include a “statement of value” addendum to their balance sheets to include intangibles such as the value of their brands. Brands are used as external cues to taste, design, quality, prestige, value and so forth. In other words, consumers associate the value of a product with the brand. For example, the value of Kodak, Sony, Coca-cola, Toyota and Marlboro is indisputable.

One estimate of the value of Coca-cola, the world's most valuable brand, places it at over \$35 billion. How does a brand create value to the customer?

Why do certain brands have more value than others? Naturally, companies with such strong brands strive to use those brands globally (extend them). The purpose of this paper is to review literature on the core associations of brands used to position brands as strategies to create competitive advantages.

1. 1 Meaning of a brand and Its Importance

A brand is a distinguishing name and/or symbol intended to identify the goods or services of either one seller or a group of sellers, and to differentiate those goods or services from those of competitors (Aaker, 1991; Stanton, 1994, and Kotler, 1996). A brand thus signals to the customer the source of the product, and protects both the customer and the producer from competitors who would attempt to provide products that appear to be identical. Ancient history provides evidence of the importance of brands. In those days, names were put on such goods as bricks in order to identify their maker (Farquhar, 1989).

It is also known that trade guilds in medieval Europe used trademarks to assure the customer and provide legal protection to the producer. In the early sixteen-century, Whisky distillers shipped their products in wooden barrels with the name of the producer burned into the barrel. The name showed the consumer who the maker (brewer) was and prevented the substitution of cheaper products. In 1835, a brand of scotch called “ Old Smuggler” was introduced in order to capitalize on the quality reputation developed by bootleggers who used a special distilling process (Aaker, 1991).

Although brands have long had a role to play in commerce, it was not until the twentieth century that branding and brand association became so central to competitors. In fact, a distinguishing characteristic of modern marketing has been its focus upon the creation of differentiated brand associations to accentuate the bases of differentiation. The idea has been to move beyond commodities to branded products - to reduce the primacy of price upon the purchase decision. Consumers associate the value of the product with the brand.

The brand can convey either a positive or a negative message about the product to the consumer (Kim and Chung, 1997, p. 361). The underlying value of a brand is often based upon specific association of a “ use context” such as heart attack prevention can provide a reason-to-buy which can attract customers. Such an association represents the product’s meaning to customers. Brand associations represent bases for purchase decision and for brandloyalty. There are a host of possible associations that a firm can build in a brand.

Not all associations need to be built but rather those that directly or indirectly affect consumers’ buying behaviour. Product attributes (customer benefits) are an important class of associations, but there are others that can be important in some contexts (Aaker, p. 114). The following section deals with the brand associations that a firm can build and how they create value to both the firm and consumer.

2. Theoretical Framework on Brand Associations

2. 1 Perceptual Dimensions of Brand Associations

As noted elsewhere in this paper, brand association is anything that is linked in

memory to a brand (Aaker, p. 09). The association reflect the fact products are used to express lifestyles whereas other associations reflect social positions, and professional roles. Still others will reflect associations involving product applications, types of people who might use the product, stores that carry the product, or salespeople who handle the product or even the country of origin. Keller (1998) defines brand associations as informational nodes linked to the brand node in memory that contains the meaning of the brand for 4 consumers. These associations include perceptions of brand quality and attitudes towards the brand.

Keller and Aaker both appear to hypothesize that consumer perceptions of brand are multi-dimensional yet many of the dimensions they identify appear to be very similar. The image that a good or a service has in the mind of the consumer how it is - positioned probably more important to its ultimate success than are its actual characteristics. Marketers try to position their brands so that they are perceived by the consumer to fit a distinctive niche in the marketplace a niche occupied by no other - product (Schiffman and Kanuk, 1994) According to Aaker (1991) there are at least nine brand associations.

The associations convey either the concept, or the meaning of the product in terms of how it fulfils a customers need. In todays highly competitiveenvironmenta distinctive product image is most important. As products become more complex and the market place more crowded, consumers rely more on the products image than its actual attributes in making purchase decisions. One of the brand associations that a firm can

use in differentiating its product is Customer benefit. Customer benefit refers to the need that is satisfied by a product. For example, cavity control by a toothpaste is a customer benefit.

Customer benefit may be rational, psychological (emotional) benefit, or self-expressive benefit. A rational benefit is closely linked to a product's attribute and would be part of a "rational" decision process. A psychological benefit relates to what feelings are engendered when buying and/or using the brand (Aaker, p. 119). An example of a rational benefit for a computer to a consumer would be its ability not to lose work whereas a psychological benefit would be the feeling of being professional. For a car, the emotional benefit would be the feeling of safety when driving it as a driver of a Volvo car would testify.

The self-expressive benefit relates to the ability of a brand to help a consumer to communicate his or her self-image. Since consumers have multiple roles, the consumer has an associated self-concept and a need to express that self-concept. The purchase and use of brands is one way to fulfill the need for self-expression (Aaker, 1991). He gives the example of a consumer who may define him/herself as successful and powerful by driving a Mercedes Benz. 5 Product attributes These refer to a product's characteristics. Attributes are associated with a product's rational benefit.

For example, a Volvo car's attribute is durability. Similarly, a shampoo's attribute would be its safety to use every day. A marketer requires to identify an attribute that is important to a major segment and not already claimed by a competitor, e. g. an attribute that offers something extra (like features or

services that offer something better). The identification of an unmet customer problem can sometimes lead to an attribute previously ignored by competitors (Aaker, p. 115). Indeed, unmet needs are strategically important because they can represent opportunities for firms that want to make major moves in the market.

Use / application A marketer can associate a brand with a particular use or application. For example, a beer can be associated with good friends in a warm social setting. A study of the coffee market revealed that there were nine relevant use contexts for coffee (Glen, et al, 1984).

User / Customer Another way of positioning a brand is to associate it with a type of user or customer. This involves identifying the brand with its target segment. For example, a brand can be associated with those who are interested in weight control as would be the case of a new drug.

Celebrity /Celebrity This is the individual who endorses a brand. Linking a celebrity with a brand can transfer associations such as reliability, strength, performance, and so on. The extent to which the association can be linked to the celebrity depends on how credible the person is perceived by the audience. Specifically, a source is more persuasive when the audience perceives him or her as highly credible than when perceived as being low in credibility (DeLozier, 1976). In other words, the person need not be credible but it is how the consumers perceive him.

Lifestyle /Personality The brand can be viewed as a person. Like a person, a brand can be perceived as being competent, trustworthy, active, or youthful (Aaker, 1996). A brand personality may help communicate a product's attribute and thus contribute

to a functional benefit. Similarly, it can help create a self-expressive benefit that becomes a vehicle for the customer to express his or her own personality. Competitors A firm positions its brand using the organization's attributes such as innovation, a drive for quality, and a concern for the environment.

A firm can position its brand with respect to a competitor. Sometimes it is not important how good customers think a firm is, but how they believe it is better than a given competitor. While this brand association can be accomplished by comparative advertising, it is not usually allowed in some countries (Cateora, 1996). Country of Origin One more strategic option that a marketer has is to associate a brand with a country. The country of origin has an effect on the market's perception of a product either a positive - or a negative perception.

Cateora (1996) asserts that a company competing in global markets may manufacture products world-wide and when the customer becomes aware of the country of origin, there is the possibility that the place of manufacture will affect product/brand image (p. 349). The influence may be to add credibility or to lower it. 2. 2 Brand Association and Value Creation Brand associations are useful to marketers. Marketers use brand associations to differentiate, position, and extend brands, to create positive attitudes and feelings towards brands, and to suggest attributes or benefits of purchasing or using a specific brand (Aaker, 1991).

However, brand associations are of more use to the customer than the marketer. The way a brand association creates value to the customer will

depend on the customer's perception of value. For each individual, reality is a totally personal phenomenon, based on that person's needs, wants, and personal experiences. Customers everywhere respond to images, myths, and metaphors that help them define their personal identities. Thus, different customers will perceive reality differently. Indeed, Schiffman & Kanuk et al (1996, p. 61) contends that although two individuals may be subject to the same stimuli under apparently the same conditions, the way they recognize them, select them, organize them, and interpret them is a highly individual process based on each person's own needs, values, and expectations. The underlying value of a brand name often is its set of associations — its meaning to people. Associations, according to Aaker (1991) represent the bases for purchase decisions and for brand loyalty. There are a host of possible associations and a variety of ways they can provide value (p. 110).

He identifies the following as the possible ways in which associations create value to the customer: helping to process / retrieve information about a brand; generating a reason to buy, and creating positive attitudes / feelings.

2.3 Brand Associations and Value of Products Model Brand associations help consumers judge the value of a product. For example, country of origin influences consumers in making judgements as to whether a product is of value or not. Consumers tend to have broad but somewhat vague stereotypes about specific countries and specific brands that they judge “best”.

For example, French perfume, Italian leather, Japanese electronics and so on (Cateora, 1996; p. 349). Using the example of country of origin as a basis for judging value of products, a model for brand associations and consumer perceptions of value of products can be depicted schematically as in the following diagram (Figure 1)

Associations • • • • • Product attributes
 Relative price Use / Application User / Customer Celebrity / Person Life
 Style/Personality Competitions Country of Origin • Value Process / Retrieve
 Information • Reason-to-buy Create Positive attitudes •

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the effects of brand association on perceived value. 8 The model shows that a product is of value to the customer and hence it can be bought to satisfy a need depending on its attributes, its use, or whether it can be associated with a particular customer group. Similarly, a consumer will consider a product as being valuable if he/she can associate it with a certain celebrity, lifestyle or country of origin. Proponents of brand positioning suggest that brands should develop distinct images and that these images will attract specific consumer segment (Hoek, et al, 2000).

Consequently, the consumer segment will see the brand as being valuable to them. How do marketers determine the brand associations that convey the value of a brand to the consumer? Association research (research on brand associations) is important to marketers since they would want to gain an insightful picture of how a brand is perceived by consumers as well as its competitors. The techniques that have been utilized by firms to measure

brand associations form part of the next section. 3. Measurement of Brand Associations

One of the key functions of brand management is to keep one jump ahead of competitors by imprinting the brand firmly on the consumer psyche — and keep it there (Emerald, 2000). A firm therefore requires understanding consumer perceptions of its brand(s) vis-a-vis those of competitors. This calls for the measurement of brand associations. The techniques used to achieve this objective can be grouped into two categories structured and unstructured techniques (Aaker, 1991; Low & Lamb, 2000). — less- 3. 1

Projective Techniques

The central feature of all projective techniques is the presentation of an ambiguous, unstructured object, activity, or person that a respondent is asked to interpret and explain (Aaker, et al, 1998). These writers argue that projective techniques are used when it is believed that respondents will not or cannot respond meaningfully to direct questions about (1) the reasons for certain behaviours or attitudes or (2) what the act of buying, owning, or using a brand means to them (p. 198). Respondents may be unwilling or unable to reveal feelings, thoughts, and attitudes when asked direct questions for a number of reasons.

First, they may be unwilling because they feel the information is embarrassing or private (Aaker, 1991; p 136). Alternatively, respondents may simply be unable to provide information as to why they buy certain items because they do not know the real reasons. Many of projective techniques employed in the measurement of brand associations are meant to address

problems aforementioned since they allow the respondent to project h self or him-self into a context, which bypasses the inhibitions, or limitations of more direct questioning (Aaker, p. 136).

The techniques involve focusing on a discussion upo the use experience, the decision process, the brand user, or off- the- wall perspectives such as considering the brand to be a person or an animal. Another characteristic of projection research is the use of ambiguous stimuli, wherein there is freedom to project experiences, attitudes, and perceptions. There are many projective (indirect) approaches to understanding brand associations. The commonly used methods are word association, picture completion, Thematic Apperception Tests, sentence completion, and story completion (Aaker, 1991; Kotler an Armstrong, 1996; Aaker, et a! 1998). 3. 2 Structured Approaches According to Aaker (1991), structured approaches involve scaling brands upon a set of dimensions. He argues that scaling approaches are more objective and reliable than qualitative approaches since they are less vulnerable to subjective interpretation. Scaling consumer perceptions involves the determination of perceptual dimensions, identification of the target segment. and the interpretation ofthe brand profiles. The perceptual dimensions may include the product attributes and benefits, user ofthe brand, or relevant competitors (Day, et al, 1979).

Scaling methods that marketers have utilized include semantic differential (Fry and Claxton, 1971), Likert scale, conjoint analysis, and natural grouping (Aaker, 1991). 4. Research in Brand Associations Research interest in branding continues to be strong in the marketing literature (Alden, et, al,

1999; Kirmani, et al, 1999). Likewise, marketing managers continue to realize the power of brands manifest in the recent efforts of many companies to build strong Internet “ brands” such as amazon. com and msn. com (Narisetti, 1998).

The way consumers perceive brand is a key determinant of long-term business — consumer relationships. Hence, building strong brand perceptions is a top priority for many firms today (Morris. 1996). Many of the studies involving brands have focused on the product attributes or benefits. Aaker and Stayman (1991) conducted a study to test whether two brands of beer had established associations with their use contexts in terms of whether the consumers felt “ warm”, “ friendly”, “ healthy”, and “ wholesome” in using the beers. They employed picture interpretation as a technique to achieve their objective.

The findings were that one brand of beer was associated with “ warm” and “ friendly” dimensions whereas the other brand was evaluated higher on “ healthy” and “ wholesome”. Hoek et al (2000) using qualitative interviews examined the descriptive and evaluative attributes employed by consumers in choosing products of value to them. Their findings revealed that descriptive attributes determine the proportion of consumers who hold favourable attitudes about the brand. However, the findings did not provide knowledge on how descriptive attributes affect consumer’s behaviour.

Although descriptive attributes could be predicted, the attributes had only a weak relationship with usage behaviour and so provided brand managers with little guidance. Again, the study suggested that longitudinal work was

required to examine whether over time, users of a product category who associate descriptive attributes with a brand they do not currently use eventually go on to purchase that brand. While many studies have focused product attributes, others have pursued the line of brand extensions (Keller, 1990; Smith and Park, 1992; Broniarczyk and Alba, 1994, Srinivas, et al, 1994).

Others have tended to dwell on branding (Rooney, 1995) and brand preferences (Aireck and Settle, 1999). Studies that have focused specifically on brand associations are those of Kim and Chung (1997), Till (1998), and Chen (2001). Kim and Chung (1997) in their study on the effect of country of origin and the value of a product identified that the brand can convey either a positive or negative message about the product to the consumer on the basis of where it is made. Till (1998) attempted to identify how celebrity endorsers can be used effectively in advertising.

Although the study did not focus on the effect of celebrity as in creating the value of a product, it shed light on how endorsers can be used to help consumers to retrieve information on a brand to buy (a value to the consumer). The study by Chen (2001) may be regarded as one of the studies that were directly related to brand associations and how they' create value of products. The purpose of the research was to identify the types of brand associations and to examine the relationship between association characteristics and brand equity.

The findings revealed that there were two brand associations brand's equity — — functional attribute and organizational attribute that contribute to a

either low or high equity. 5. Critique of the Researches in Brand Associations
Marketing researchers have not used consistent definition or measurement technique to assess consumer perceptions of brands and the value they attach to such brands. Keller (1998) considers brand associations as consisting of brand image, brand knowledge, and brand awareness.

He further says that brand associations include perceptions of brand quality and attitudes towards the brand, These constructs can be labelled as product attributes according to Kotler and Armstrong (1996). Yet Aaker (1991) clearly says that the concepts relate to distinct categories of brand associations, each signifying a different aspect of the brand. He argues that a brand manager will be primarily interested in those associations that directly or indirectly affect buying behaviour and whether they are strong and shared by many or weak and differ from person to person (p. 113).

Keller and Aaker both appear to hypothesize those consumer perceptions of brands and hence associations are multi-dimensional, yet many of the dimensions they identify appear to be very similar. Furthermore, Aaker's and Keller's conceptualisation of consumers' psychological representation of brands have not been subjected to empirical validation. Consequently, it is difficult to determine if the various concepts they discuss, such as brand attitudes, perceived quality, and customer benefits are separate dimensions of brand associations (multi-dimensional) as they propose, or they are simply indicators of brand associations (uni-dimensional).

The second criticism levelled against studies on brand associations is the measurement techniques employed. Many of the methods used such as the

projective techniques tend to be more subjective and employ small samples (Aaker, 1991). Even those that are regarded as being objective and reliable than qualitative approaches i. e. , scaling methods face the problem of validity. Aaker (1991) observes that there is always a concern with the validity of the scaling task. Can a respondent actually position beers on an “aged a long time” dimension?

He observes that there is the possibility of unfamiliarity with one or more of the brands, The other problem is that the respondent may be unable to understand operationally what “aged” means, or how to evaluate a brand on this dimension (p. 151). Thus any ambiguity in the scale or inability of a respondent to use the scale will affect validity and reliability of the results. The measurement of brand associations needs to be done with respect to a specified segment within the context of a competitive set of brands. This implies that brand associations and consumer perceptions of value of products should be done for one segment.

However, much of the time the scaling task should be done for multiple segments (Aaker, 1991). The implication here is that any relevant segment defined by age, income, usage rate will have different perceptions from others. Marketers may not only be interested in the associations with the brand but also with the association strength, that is, how confident the consumers are about the associations with the brand. Similarly, the marketer may be interested in understanding whether the consumers have a clear image of the brand association.

There is yet another criticism on studies on brand associations. There appears to be other emerging constructs for brand associations. Aaker (1991) provides eleven types of brand associations, which Kotler and Armstrong (1996) consider to be part of the levels of a product. The question here is how significant these constructs are to a brand association measurement? Again, which associations discriminate between buyers and nonbuyers? Lastly, the model used as a basis for identifying brand associations and how they create the value of products is itself questionable.

Narisetti (1998) observes that technology plays a big role in brand associations and value of products. Where does technology fit in the model? Similarly, familiarity with a brand appears to moderate the dimensionality of brand associations. Where can this aspect be shown in the model? 13 6.

Future Research Directions There is growing importance of brands and consumer perceptions of brands among marketing researchers. To address this issue, marketers need to develop extensive conceptual treatments of brand and associations and related issues.

To achieve this objective, it is imperative for the marketers to design practical measurement of the constructs. : number of studies that attempt to measure some aspect of consumer brand associations do not use consistent measurement techniques. Again, there is need to use methods that help in discriminating between brands. Indeed, Aaker (1991) argues that a major consideration is whether the perceptual dimensions discriminate between brands. If a measurement technique can be developed to help an

attribute to discriminate, i. e.. set one brand off against another, it might be worth.

He posits that factor analysis may be a useful tool in reducing a set of factors (associations) to a few factors or dimensions by combining the words or phrases whose meanings are similar (p. 149). Secondly, the empirical works operationally brand associations as uni-dimensional. Yet conceptual models depict the brand associations as multi-dimensional (Keller and Aaker, 1997). Third, marketers need to employ multiple segments in measuring the usefulness of brand associations in helping consumers on the choice of products. As noted earlier, any relevant segment defined by age, lifestyle, or user status may well have different exceptions from others. For example, the user and nonuser groups quite often differ in their brand perceptions (Aaker, 1991, p. 151). Lastly, many of the studies have focused on consumer goods. Specifically, many have been carried among fast-moving consumer goods (brands with short consumption cycles that are typically bought from supermarkets) (Hoek, et al, 2000). There is need to focus on industrial goods or on services. It is therefore proposed that a research aimed at identifying the brand associations of industrial goods or services would be more beneficial to academicians and practitioners.

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