

# The importance of brand attributes



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In order to understand the importance of brand attributes, and their contribution to the creation of memorable and attractive brands, it is important to understand the significant difference between products and brands. A product is purely a physical thing, defined by physical attributes. For example, cola is a physical product made from a combination of caramel, caffeine, sugar, carbonated water and other colours and flavours. In contrast, a brand is a defined image and name associated with a specific firm's products, and used to differentiate these products from those of competitors (Kotler and Keller, 2008). As a result, a brand effectively represents the promise of quality for consumers, and the promise that a product will meet certain standards and expectations (Aaker, 1996). At the same time, a brand can also represent a conceptualisation of the values that a product espouses, hence how these values can differentiate one product from another, and influence a consumer's buying decision (Gobe, 2001).

As such, the concept of branding is closely tied to the development of modern consumerism. Consumerism refers to the phenomenon whereby individuals feel compelled to purchase ever greater quantities of products, in the belief that these purchases have tangible impacts on their quality of life, and also help individuals to define themselves. Brands play an important role in this, in that they can help individuals create a desired self image through the brand attributes. This can be seen in the fact that branding is most visible and effective in products that are conspicuously consumed, such as cars, mobile phones and clothing, and much less effective in products that are consumed without being clearly visible such as petrol or milk. Ultimately, a brand is only effective if the attributes are consistent with the customer's self-image, and the attributes are espoused in a way that allows the customer to benefit from them, fitting them to their own self-image.

### **Brand equity & brand assets**

The main concept which is discussed when considering the attractiveness of a brand, and hence the success of said brand, is the level of brand equity that a brand possesses. According to Ponsonby-McCabe and Boyle (2006, p. 175) brand equity is made up of four key factors: “ the unique attributes of the products concerned; brand awareness; brand associations; and brand loyalty”. In other words, it is important for a brand to own a certain combination of product attributes; to be known and recognisable by consumers; to trigger positive or negative emotions to customers; and encourage them to develop bonds with the product and relate to it steadily. Normally, these assets are usually built up in stages, with the product attributes first being developed, then the company working on defining a

brand and creating customer awareness of it. Once this has been done, the company can look to develop positive brand associations, and then create brand loyalty amongst consumers. However, this is not always the case with some brands and their marketing strategies, such as the Apple Computing brand, reaching the point where they have brand loyalty even before unveiling a new product (Twitchell, 2001).

In short, a brand is only recognised as being attractive and effective when it becomes a value creating resource that can provide some form of competitive advantage to its owner. This ultimately means that developing an effective brand is a big accomplishment. In fact, most companies and marketers struggle hard to achieve it. What they are actually required to do is find ways to determine how consumers view the brand and how they respond to the brand messages. In particular, brand loyalty can only arise once consumers have repeatedly interacted with a brand and formed a connection to the brand and its values, which requires long term investment by the marketer, but also an element of risk (Ponsonby-McCabe and Boyle, 2006). Consumer loyalty results from the combination of three different kinds of attributes, or benefits, which a brand offers to consumers, and the positive response of consumers to this combination. These three kinds of attributes are functional attributes, symbolic attributes, and experiential attributes, and this piece will assess the nature and impact of each of them in turn.

## **Functional attributes of a brand**

The functional attributes of a brand are focused on the attributes of the product, which should be unique so as to mark it out as being superior to

competing brands. In particular, functional attributes focus on tangible attributes and benefits which give the product the ability to perform its intended task to a higher level of effectiveness than other products, thus providing tangible value to consumers. For example, the Dyson range of vacuum cleaners has established a relatively strong brand based on the company's use of unique technology to overcome many of the problems that are regularly encountered with other vacuum cleaners. For example, the company developed an effective bag-less vacuum cleaner, which saved users from having to replace the bag on a regular basis. This was marketed with the slogan 'say goodbye to the bag' and helped create a functional brand image to justify a premium priced product (Samuelsen and Olsen, 2010).

Indeed, according to Samuelsen and Olsen (2010) claims based on functional attributes and benefits in high involvement situations where the quality of the product is paramount can be more persuasive than those based on the other two kinds of attributes. In addition, functional attributes are unique aspects of brands, because they represent aspects which can be clearly defined and observed (Hoch, 2002). This can often be used to the benefit of the brand, by clearly incorporating the attribute in the design of the product. For example, in the case of the Dyson vacuum cleaner, the company made the sides of the product out of transparent plastic, so that users could see the absence of a bag inside, observe the product working in its unique manner and appreciate its promising effectiveness. This helped to clearly direct user attention to the main functional attribute and underline its benefit

for the user, as well as create a very strong brand image, which would be maintained throughout the company's other product lines.

## **Symbolic attributes of a brand**

In contrast, symbolic attributes represent the extrinsic advantages and features that a product might possess. As such, they are not directly related to the product itself, and are rather linked to the intangible benefits that customers could gain by using the product, such as improvement of social status and higher levels of self-esteem. The symbolic attributes of the brand are strongly linked to the brand image, and hence consumers' perception of themselves and other people when using the brand. In general, the symbolic attributes are strongly linked to the concept of brand association, and therefore there is a positive relationship between the number of symbolic attributes that a brand has, and the likelihood of consumers choosing the brand (Romaniuk, 2003). This is because the more symbolic attributes a brand possesses, the more likely it is that it will create positive associations in customers' minds, and hence the more likely it is that it will be considered favourably in a given purchase situation. However, care needs to be taken when attempting to manage the symbolic attributes, as at times they may not be consistent with other kinds of attributes.

One example of symbolic attributes is that of the Burberry brand of clothing. This brand evolved over to become symbolically linked with upper class living, being outdoor wear and being promoted through an affluent brand image. As a result, the distinctive check patterned clothing became seen as a sign of class and sophistication in many countries, even though the check pattern itself had little functional value. The company then attempted to

expand its brand reach and associate itself with a larger audience, through the use of mass marketing techniques. However, as a result of this the company saw its products increasingly used by lower class individuals. This meant that Burberry lost this symbolic connection to upper class living and expensive lifestyles, and thus lost the support of much of its core market. As a result, the company found its sales falling in its traditional markets and was forced to refocus its symbolic brand attributes.

## **Experiential attributes of a brand**

Experiential attributes are similar to symbolic attributes, in that they too are based on intangible factors. However, at the same time they are also linked to the extent to which brands as a whole match the tastes and self images of consumers. In fact, the success of any experiential attribute is highly subjective and is based on demographic segmentation. Undoubtedly, experiential attributes are some of the most powerful attributes in determining the success of a brand. In particular, internal values and customer personalities play important roles in developing brand loyalty, depending on how the customers see the brand's role in their lifestyles (Schultz and Ervolder, 1998). In addition to this, there is evidence from some studies that experiential attributes can also affect perceptions of functional and symbolic attributes (Kempf and Smith, 1998). For example, experiential attributes such as the flavour of a cake has been shown to affect customer perceptions of its healthiness, and what the cake implies about the consumption benefits of eating more of it (Van Osselaer and Janiszewski, 2001). Of course, at the same time it is possible for functional attributes to be inconsistent with experiential attributes, for example if the cake has

experiential attributes which associate it with healthy eating, but the functional attributes show it is high in unhealthy fat and sugar.

Due to the power of experiential attributes, they tend to lie at the heart of many of the most successful branding images. For example, the shoe company Nike makes shoes that are functionally no different to many of those of its competitors. They are all made in the same factories, often in South East Asia, and are generally indistinguishable if the branding is removed. However, Nike's brand has been carefully managed over the years to have strong experiential attributes, which are consistent with the tastes and self images of the company's customers. This has effectively turned Nike into the 'coolest' model of training shoe (Sherry, 1998). Indeed, the company has even opened its own store "Nike Town", which is designed to deliver a landmark retail experience based on providing fun, whilst also being a museum demonstrating all the qualities of the Nike brand, and encouraging impulsive buying behaviour on the part of shoppers. Such is the power of the brand that Nike Town store is actually designed as a showcase rather than a retail shop, and many people visit the store "not to buy something but to see it" (Sherry 1998, p. 111).

The example of Nike also shows the indisputable power of a corporate brand, which is separate from any individual product or product range, and instead focuses on communicating the corporate values to customers, and thus influencing both attitudinal and behavioural consumer loyalty towards the company as a whole. As such, it brings together the whole range of "corporate activities, corporate associations, organizational values, and corporate personality" (Anisimova 2007, p. 395) and integrates them into the <https://assignbuster.com/the-importance-of-brand-attributes/>



functional, emotional and symbolic brand benefits. Ultimately, this helps create consumer corporate brand perceptions, which influence levels of consumer loyalty towards the company and all of its products. For example, Apple Computing, which was discussed above, has a very strong corporate brand, as reflected in the large number of people who regularly attend Apple product promotions and new product launches. Such is the strength of this brand that it enables the company to launch new products and be assured of a significant market for these products, even if they are not functionally or symbolically superior to other similar products on the market.

### **Building and maintaining a successful brand**

However, beyond the strength of corporate brands such as the above, it is important to realise that functional, symbolic, and experiential attributes do not always behave in unison, and are not always consistent with each other, in terms of the way they are perceived by consumers. For example, functional and symbolic attributes can often be influenced by advertising campaigns and claims made by companies, rather than what a consumer actually sees (Drolet and Aaker, 2002). However, these perceptions of attributes can later be changed based on a customer's experience with a given product. This implies that businesses need to be very careful when marketing and branding a product, to ensure that the claims that they make are backed up by the product experience. At the same time, product experience can potentially influence a customer's perception of the brand in wholly unpredictable ways, which implies that it can be difficult for companies to ensure that their functional and symbolic brand attributes merge effectively to create memorable and attractive brands.

Indeed, according to Orth and de Marchi (2007, p. 219) “ the interaction between advertising claims and personal tasting experience” plays an important role “ in shaping brand beliefs and subsequent purchase intentions”. Consequently, the most effective way for companies to harness this to create memorable and attractive brands is to ensure that functional, symbolic, and experiential attributes are consistent, and designed to evoke strong purchase intentions. However, companies also need to understand the differences that may arise among functional, symbolic, and experiential qualities, particularly when a product is being branded and advertised in an unfamiliar marketing or advertising environment. In this case, “ existing brand beliefs and attributes can be reinforced or weakened through product experiential attributes” (Orth and de Marchi 2007, p. 219), which further supports the argument that experiential attributes play a key role in influencing the interaction between functional and symbolic attributes.

This has very important implications for the question of which attributes and benefits have the greatest impact on brands, and thus how successful brands need to be designed to ensure that the functional, symbolic and experiential benefits are maximised. The literature in the area tends to indicate that different channels are more effective at transmitting different attributes and benefits. For example, advertisements are more likely to succeed when they focus on communicating experiential beliefs, because experiential attributes tend to persist once the customer has product experience. On the contrary, functional or symbolic beliefs are often altered by product experience, unless the consumer has already a strong experiential belief. In addition, there is evidence that some product

categories are seen as more experiential by consumers, particularly products such as clothing or footwear, and hence in these categories experiential attributes are likely to be the most effective at promoting brands.

However, it is very important to understand that experiential attributes do have limits when being compared to functional and symbolic attributes. In particular, whilst experiential beliefs are more likely to persist after a customer has product experience, if they fail to do so then the customer can feel strongly betrayed. For example, if a customer buys a pair of Nike trainers that are uncomfortable and badly made, then they may feel that the experiential image of the brand has been tarnished, and hence will be unlikely to ever choose these products again, even if the faulty shoes are replaced. With this in mind, it can be argued that unless a company can be certain that they have a strong set of experiential attributes, they may be better advised to focus on symbolic attributes, which can be easier to demonstrate and manage, as well as appeal to wider ranges of customers. However, symbolic beliefs are also easier to lose control of, as happened in the case of Burberry. Furthermore, the company should also look to ensure that they have some control over their functional benefits, and are able to use these benefits to address any issues, which may emerge if the experiential and symbolic attributes fail to attract customers.

## **Conclusion**

The evidence from the literature referred to and the examples discussed above indicates that when a brand finds a way to combine both functional and symbolic attributes effectively, it will most likely be memorable and appealing to consumers. However, this does not the only way to brand

success, as there are other factors which may play an important role. For example, in the case of Dyson, the company was able to rely on its functional attributes in order to drive its brand success without the use of (or the need for) distinctive symbolic attributes. On the other hand, Nike was able to create a brand based mainly on experiential attributes. Similarly, Apple was able to do the same for their entire company, with neither company bothering to pay significant attention to emphasising the functional attributes of their products in their branding. However, whilst these aforementioned cases showcase some of the most effective examples of branding, they also represent branding which is somewhat outside the norm. It is true that, most brands and marketers would be better advised to focus more strongly on the need to provide consistency between functional and symbolic attributes in order to create a successful brand. This should be a priority and a first step in the branding process, while at the same time the brand is gradually gaining enough awareness and allowing consumers to form the associations necessary, so that the ground for the use of experiential branding is prepared. What is more, the reliance on either symbolic or functional attributes solely could bring the desired results..

When attempting to create memorable and attractive brands it is also important to keep in mind how attributes can alter, improve or worsen product consumption experience. The functional attributes of the brand are closely related to the consumption experience. They determine or influence the way individuals actually use the brand. In the case of functional brands such as Dyson, the functional attributes play a vital role in the consumption experience: if they are below the standard expected, the consumption

experience will be very poor. On the other hand, if they meet the consumers' expectations or they are even above the standard expected, the experience will be memorable. However, in the case of brands such as Nike, the functional attributes are less important: great functionality does not necessarily boost the consumption experience as consumers are more focused on the symbolic and experiential aspects of the brand. In short, symbolic attributes do not tend to have an impact on the consumption experience, as the symbolism of most brands is based on their image, rather than on what they actually do. Nike trainers do not actually offer consumers an experience very different from that offered by trainers of competing brands. Finally, experiential attributes do not necessarily have an impact on the consumption experience, unless that experience is significantly far from the experiential expectations of consumers. For example, consumers expect Apple products to be highly innovative and lifestyle focused. If an Apple product fails to meet these experiential expectations, the consumption experience will be a negative one, and their brand loyalty will decline.