Increasing brand equity through brand personality

Business, Company

Introduction

Since the publication of Marketing Behaviour and Executive Action in the 1950s (Alderson, 1957) the importance of consumers as individually motivated decision makers has been recognised. This assertion gives rise to debates about themotivationfor consumer decisions: Does a consumer choose to buy a brand simply because they have heard a lot of good things about it or are there further considerations of what the brand says about them and theirpersonality. One extreme of the debate sees the brand as a set of pre-ordained definitions uniformly absorbed by consumers whilst the other sees each individual creating unique ideas and associations regarding the brand in their own minds. The significant bodies of evidence for each view are considered critically below with a view to reaching a critical conclusion. The potential for, and significant likelihood of, a moderate conclusion between the two extremes must be borne in mind.

David Aaker (1991) first conceived of the idea of the value of a brand lying in its consumer’s heads, or consumer based brand equity. This equity did not imply subjective, personal involvement on the part of the customer and consisted of fairly objective considerations such as awareness, image andloyalty. Aaker did however establish the idea of some form of intellectual equity building process where brand loyalty can be built and maintained in an individual’s head. These assertions were reinforced in the book by numerous brand case studies, ranging from Ivory soap, to the Ford Taurus to Weight Watchers.

Alone and together with Alexander Biel (1993), Aaker developed and gathered evidence for the consumer based brand equity model. The 1993 work contained a good deal of research and rhetoric about brands, personality and the interplay between the two . Norman Smothers' chapter considering the most successful brands as charismatic, being able to " Generate extraordinary levels of buyer attachment and motivation" (pp. 109). Whilst Grant McCraken developed his earlier (1988) work onCultureand Consumption, laying out a model in which brand success depends on brand characteristics being related to personal ones, a form of cultural consumption which is obviously personality dependant. The characterisations of brands as charismatic, or as having cultural characteristics, which can be individually identified with, provide a strong theoretical backing for brand-personality salience and involvement, the authors even discuss such issues.

Max Blackston's chapter in Aaker and Biel's book goes beyond the idea of personality salience to characterise brands as relationship builders, an idea which formed the core of Keller's (1993) model of consumer based brand equity. This model is based on customers combining objective assessments of the brand's product with subjective feelings about the characteristics of a brand presented in its imagery and marketing material. Keller's model solidly operationalizes the process whereby uniform, mass distributed brand messages are absorbed by consumers and turned into unique concepts which each consumer relates to in an equally unique way. The consumer builds up a relationship or personal resonance with the brand which encourages investment, loyalty and positive assessment of the brand.

Practical research in support of this involvement and salience has been carried out in a number of different contexts using several different methodologies. Keller himself laid out and trialled a number of research methodologies in 1998 concluding in favour of his model. These were later taken up and expanded upon in testing the model’s applicability in the hotel and hospitality industry (Kim and Kim, 2005), the sportswear industry (Tong & Hawley 2009) and a huge variety of other industries besides. So it can be safely assumed that the model has proven effective across different industries, it also seems highly applicable across different media: In 2007 Mark Zuckerberg made a speech outlining the relationship-building abilities of social marketing, saying; “ For the last hundred years media has been pushed out to people, but now marketers are going to be a part of a conversation” (6th Nov 2007). It seems that modern media marketing methods are making ideas around consumer involvement even more relevant.

As the argument and evidence in favour of personal consumer involvement has grown, a compelling case has been constructed against the idea. This realist perspective is based on a uniform, modernist view of branding where popular, large-selling brands with high penetration appeal to customers as a de facto effect of their objective strength. From this it can be further inferred that no significant, subjective consumer-brand relationships need to exist for a consumer to choose a brand. When looking at this perspective it must be clarified that not all uniform views, where large brands and customer appeal are similar, make the further inference that there is no personal involvement on the part of the consumer. Some studies show a limited amount of individual involvement.

For example Russell-Bennett et al. (2007) point out that any form of individual choice is limited by issues such as automated purchases, necessary purchases and other purchase context where single or limited options are available. This means that consumer based brand equity is limited in certain markets such as business to business services. Ehrenberg et al. take the issue further in the conclusion to their 2004 market survey, asserting that much of what is called brand loyalty stems from normalisation of purchase rather than individual benefits or resonance. In other words customers think ‘ It works, so I’ll keep buying it’, rather than ‘ It works for me, so I’ll keep buying it.

As well as evidence which limits the applicability of consumer based brand equity, there is a good deal that is irreconcilable with the concept as it stands. Brand attribute surveys have found repeatedly that brands with positive attribute perceptions are generally the large ones with solid marketing strategies, high penetration and high, simple salience. Meaning that personal relation to brand characteristics and resultant brand differentiation is minimal or entirely negligible, as in Singh et al. (2009)

Despite the opposing evidence and caveats the ‘ consumer-based brand equity’ model and its implications are founded in solid theory and well evidenced. The involvement that consumers feel in brands which represent them and their personalities can be said to have a significant effect on brand associations and purchase choices across a range of different choices and media. The evidence of Singh et al. and other similar surveys shows that there are issues in the theory to be resolved, whilst other research shows that it is not universally applicable and that there are some limitations to be accounted for. Despite this though it is certain that consumer-brand relationships and characteristic resonance is a significant contributing factor to brand selection decisions.

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