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SACKETT, P.J., KEFALLONITIS, E.G

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Enterprise Integration
Cranfield University, Cranfield, Bedford, MK43 0AL, UK
Tel: +44(0)1234 754073
Fax: +44(0)1234 750852

Using feature design to showcase the corporate brand

by P. J. Sackett and E. G. Kefallonitis

In evaluating brands, consumer perceptions are the bottom line. Peter Sackett and Efstathios Kefallonitis note that problems arise from lack of differentiation, too much or confusing information, disfunctional products and services, uncoordinated brand media, and the failure to temper global approaches with an understanding of local or regional culture. Distinctive, coherent brands depend on attention to detail and a vigilant consumer focus.

Consumer involvement in the conception, formulation, and marketing stages of a company's product or service offering is increasingly vital for the successful functioning of a brand and its sustainable values. However, to address brand experience at the organizational level, the focus needs to shift toward consumer perception and its role in the design and maintenance of a brand's position in the marketplace. To do this, we need to establish key issues that characterize the current brand environment.

Brand communication challenges

Companies have responded to consumer demand by making products that are more technologically and aesthetically advanced and have a greater number of functions. Consumers are more aware of their rights and of product usage information. They are more



Peter J. Sackett
Professor, Integrated
Systems, Cranfield
University



Efstathios G. Kefallonitis,
PhD Candidate, Enterprise
Integration, Cranfield
University

likely to want to know about the internal functioning of an organization; their purchasing activity is influenced by what that company can do for them. In an attempt to address all of these demands—by trying to be all things to all consumers—companies often fail to communicate distinctly, which may actually exacerbate the situation. They may also hasten to use the most up-to-date technology for the product. However, if this advance isn't reflected in the media the company uses to communicate its brand values, the effort will be wasted. The fact, for instance, that an airline is offering the most advanced aircraft possible will fail to communicate any added value to its consumers if it is unable to embed this information into its projected brand experience. What is needed is a more holistic concept, one that would truly create a "consumer-pleasing" environ-

ment through the engagement of senses and emotions.

A static or dysfunctional brand identity may not be able to support positive change. In fact, if the company provides a technologically advanced product, but its brand identity is perceived as poor, the brand experience created will be unfavorable, technological advance or not. When a brand and the products or services it supports do not refer to each other, supporting the messages that need to be projected, the impression given is of impairment. This is a case in which the product is the only focus, and the brand is left behind. However, focusing only on brand identity is no better at projecting the desired results.

The solution is the creation of a unique and unified brand experience that will reflect the company's advantages over its competitors. In this way, it will keep its existing customers and also attract other consumers (figure 1).

The roles of theory, practice, and consumer perception

Brand management operations developed in an increasingly complex environment have revealed the need for redirection in the focus of the branding world. This need derives from the lack of communication among the various fields associated with brand research. It is also the result of a combination of challenges during the stages of conception, creation, and use of various elements of the brand messages passed between companies and their consumer audiences.

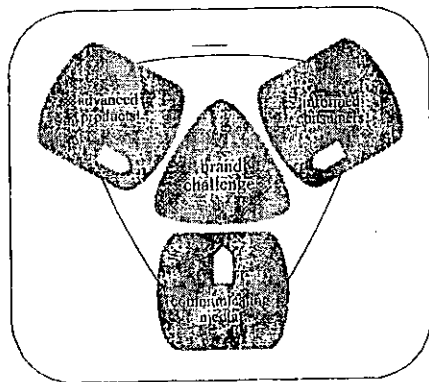


Figure 1. More technologically and aesthetically advanced products, better-informed consumers, and inconsistent communicating media create brand challenges that need to be addressed.

In practice, the use of numerous methodologies and terminologies, often developed and used internally by the company, serve internal integrity but leave the outside onlooker with somewhat of a puzzle. In academic theory, on the other hand, we find research that has not been validated in practice.

The work of these two fields, which unfortunately have been developed separately, results in an incoherent brand experience and confusion to the consumer. The effect is that we deliver unsuitable, unintegrated, and unstructured messages to the consumer audience.

Theory and practice confirm the need for increased levels of consumer recognition of the brand experience as annotated by the key elements that form a company's brand. The more we know about the consumer brand experience, the better we can interpret the relationship between the consumer and the brand.

Beyond these, we witness the increasing voice of brand polemicists developing theories against brand positioning campaigns, rather than supporting the consumer voice. Integration and simplicity of all available expertise and means is needed for the creation of a clarified, solid, and consumer-focused brand direction (figure 2).

The challenge of brand delivery

The relation between a company's product or service offering and the consumer audience's conception, as projected through the communicating means, is complex. Where unclarified and problematic areas exist, a sense of distrust and uncertainty results. Some of these problems are

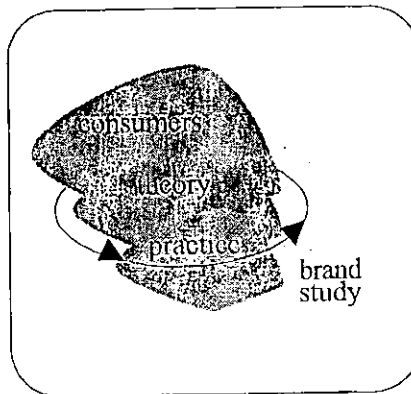


Figure 2. The study of brands should include information drawn from both theory and practice, from academia as well as industry, and it should also include the viewpoints of consumers.

related to the product or service provided, some to the way in which it is communicated, and some to the way in which it is understood by the consumer. Brand confusion, brand over-information, lack of real brand differentiation, absence of brand reality, brand and product dysfunction, and difficulties of global branding are all common challenges (figure 3).

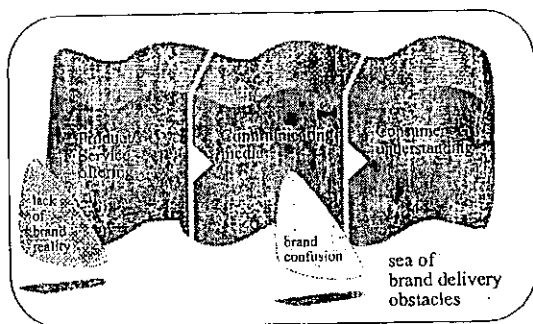


Figure 3. A series of complex obstacles exist between a company's product or service offering and the understanding of the consumer—obstacles that must be surmounted by better communications.

Brand confusion

This happens when one brand is mistaken for another. It often results from a brand's inability to justify its unique presence within a market of similar products or services offered by one or more competing brands. This is due to the commonality of the brand messages projected and the lack of real brand differentiation that results from the absence of unique characterizing elements.

This creates in the consumer a feeling of distrust toward the company. It often happens when one company is the acknowledged leader in a market. Competing brands immediately rush to imitate its brand message, and unique brand and product associations are lost. The feeling is of a mass-produced brand. When, for example, sleeper beds were introduced on premium-service airlines, that move was immediately copied by competitors. The same result occurred when one company introduced a seat that reclined further than was the norm. Since no attempt had been made to associate these improvements with the airline's brand, once those fleeting advantages were copied, the airline lost its competitive edge.

Brand over-information

Sometimes, consumers receive more brand information than they actually need. Trying to "be everything to everyone" may result in an unclear image and even cloud the qualities of the core brand identity that have been developed and enjoyed up to that time. This causes consumer distress that may result in brand rejection.

It is important to keep information levels as close to the brand source as possible and at levels committed to delivering accurately and precisely the company's brand promise. Otherwise, the brand may lose some of the unique associations it has enjoyed, eventually leading to confusion and possible rejection.

Lack of real brand differentiation

In this case, either the brand message projected is very similar to the others, or there is no real differentiation in the actual offering or in the process by which the brand message is delivered.

This is apparent when there are similarities between the communicating processes and deliverables of brands, in other words, when the brand message is the same and so is the product. Companies used to differentiate their products or services by deploying new technologies that would distinguish them from their competitors—for example, an airline might offer on-board Internet access. However, as has already been pointed out, this approach needs to be much more closely associated with the overall brand essence.

A product may be copied, but not a brand personality. After all, it is this that makes people prefer one brand over another. The more similar the product offering to that of the competition, the greater the need for differentiation in the brand personality.

Absence of brand reality

When a brand enjoys consistency in its message and is understood appropriately by the consumer through all the means by which it is communicated—including the product or service it represents—it has achieved brand reality. A message that is projected clearly can be delivered appropriately, from the first advertisement the consumer sees to the actual use of the product or service. It is this period in which the consumer discovers whether the brand message is

truly in keeping with what he or she has purchased.

If the information a company sends to the consumer does not represent the image a company holds internally, brand reality is lost. That company is sending branding messages that project negative associations of which it is unaware.

It's interesting to "translate" a company's image through the brand messages it deploys with its products or services. Many products project a confusing image far from the thing that is actually being marketed. There are cases in which the brand identity elements did not mirror the company's cultural essence or meet the brand recognition of the consumer.

Brand-product dysfunction

The phenomenon of brand-to-product dysfunction—and vice versa—is found when the brand carries a negative connotation that transfers to the product, or when a product purchased in light of its positive brand identity proves to be a disappointment. Again using an airline example, if a passenger is uncomfortable in the seating provided and moreover finds that the in-flight entertainment does not function properly, he or she may well blame the airline rather than the product manufacturer.

Global Branding—unsuccessful approach

This occurs when companies try to undertake a global branding campaign for a large number of countries and discover they have underestimated their needs in terms of local expertise. Cultural, social, and perceptual boundaries vary from country to country, which is why global branding campaigns require much time and planning and don't always return the results expected.

Brand experience through attention to features

With theoretical and practical insight, a better job can be done of communicating brand experience to consumers. The transition is important. In some cases, a change in brand identity does not meet with consumer acceptance; in others, it is used inappropriately, with negative results. In an airline context, this recalls the "world images" tail designs of British Airways planes. The campaign focused in repainting the airline's aircraft tails with designs

created by artists around the world, demonstrating the company's global essence of services. The outcome of this decision, after a period of debate, was that the scheme was abolished as unfavorable, and a modernized Union Jack was used instead. Such missteps can mean lengthy periods of time spent readdressing the problem, as well as an increased financial burden.

It is important to note, however, that change and innovation do not necessarily mean complexity and multifunctionality; often, simplicity is the best policy.

Enhancing consumer brand perception through attention to the design of product features increases and sustains market value. This can be done through discovering the unique associations between a product or service and the associated brand experience from a consumer viewpoint. Doing so provides information on the efficiency of past marketing and brand positioning techniques and allows the opportunity to develop metrics to evaluate consumer brand experience. An added plus to the technique described below is that it engages the consumer in a rewarding and emotionally pleasing experience that subsequently influences his or her purchasing behavior.

This approach (figure 4) takes its focus from the shift toward anthropocentric branding that has occurred during the last few years—which in itself is a reflection on a world economy that has shifted from being industrially driven to being driven by people and services. The marketplace now clearly values a company's ability to provide a personalized branding experience as a reliable, functional, innovative, and emotionally pleasing result of the product or service it offers.

For the organization, this can be translated as *personal comfort equals effective product/service management. The more careful our approach, the better the result.*

For the consumer, the most important thing is the relevance of the product or service to its use and the style it means to embody. Style is

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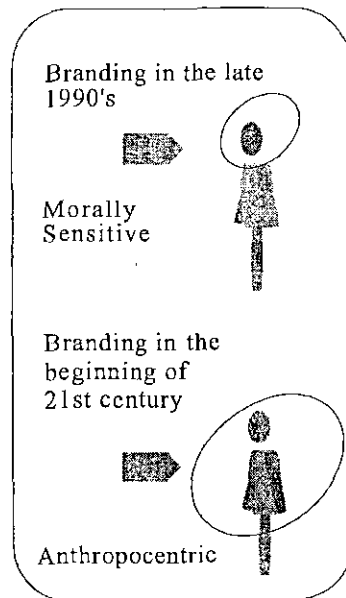


Figure 4. The transition in brand focus, from the late 1990s to the present.

what will reinforce the choice, and attention to detail will make the experience more memorable and create strong connections among the product, the brand, and the consumer.

Try to remember

It is memory that keeps a brand alive. This was borne out by a recent survey undertaken by Cranfield University in which airline passengers were interviewed at home and at airports. The survey was divided into two parts. The first part consisted of a series of "verbal recall" interviews on the subject of experiences with airlines and, more specifically, with Olympic Airways. One of the details the survey revealed was that the majority of the sample group associated airlines with the color blue. Indeed, most airlines use blue in their brand identity products—ranging from cabin interiors to uniforms and baggage tags. (In fact, although Iberia Airlines, the Spanish national air carrier, uses red, orange, and yellow—the national colors of Spain—for its corporate identity, it uses blue for its staff uniforms and cabin products.) When we then asked past and current passengers of Olympic Airways to tell us the color with which they would prefer to associate New Olympic Airways (the company that would be formed as a result of the airline's privatization process). The major-

ity responded with a preference for the colors blue, white, and light blue. These were some of the colors used in the current Olympic brand identity palette and, of course, the national colors of Greece, where the airline originates. What we take away from this survey is that color alone doesn't differentiate airlines; what is needed is secondary visual stimuli that will set them apart in the market. For Olympic, the visual stimuli are the Olympic circles. The fact that this collides with the survey's first finding—that the majority associated the color blue with airlines—proved that color affords no real differentiation among brands.

When questioned about the service offered on their most recent flight, most of the interviewees responded on a rather flat level. They were not able to describe or remember anything unique relating to the airline they had used, or any factors that differentiated it from airlines flown previously.

We don't remember details of a brand by its identity, but rather by the experience we link with it. That is why it is essential that all product experience should be linked with the brand itself. This becomes even more important if we consider the effect of design on a brand.

To investigate further, we went forward with a "visual recognition" electronic survey, in which Olympic Airways passengers were asked to identify, from a selection of images, the ones they would choose to relate specific assets of the airline's brand. The images were chosen specifically to represent the verbal recall responses from the first part of the survey. Sets and combinations of colors were also presented to assess the solidity and strength of each color mix. This was important, as often people do not associate the visual and the verbal elements of a brand with the same strength.

Deploying methods that would deliver information using more than one of our senses, as well as including consumers' views in creating a brand experience, would help us determine the key elements that construct an organization's core brand assets. This forms the basis of a system that is able to identify, examine, and further validate those key brand assets. It is a system for differentiating a company's offering through a customized set of elements that come from, belong to, and refer to the company, almost becoming a trademark.

Identifying key aesthetic, visual, and emotional points—achieving a better link between a product's service experience and the company's brand—will support and reinforce a company's position against that of the competition. The points that complement the key brand assets would embody them in product features that the organization may choose to implement as its new communication channels.

When we choose a brand, we expect to receive the same experience we received when we used it the first time. A successful brand is one that can embody brand identity messages within all methods of communication possible.

What makes a brand an experience is its unique combination of visual, verbal, and auditory elements—a recognizable experience that is worth paying a little more to have again. It is vital to link memory associations with the end product, and we need to be accurate, because consumers link brand names with product performance and information about that product or family of products.

Our reactions come from the meaning we have already given to things. The sequence is event—meaning—react (figure 5). The opportunity is to produce a brand element that will refer to an emotion and/or feeling associated with that product/service provider. Branding is much more than developing a familiar consumer image.

One more example from the aviation industry: If it were only the flight itself that mattered, the Concorde would not be in the air again. It is the concept and perceptions Concorde carries that make it a unique flying experience. Airlines

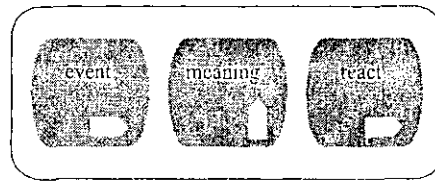


Figure 5. Our reactions come from the meanings we attach to things.

are not just air transportation; they are really *creators of travel*, with the potential to be unique in terms of character.

A work in progress

It is important to match the originality, consistency, and relevance of the brand experience to its originating source: the core brand value. Otherwise, companies will continue to struggle to differentiate themselves from their competitors. Meanwhile, we'll continue with our research, studying the best ways to go beyond verbal and visual territories to use all the senses at our disposal in the service of the brand.

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