

What's in a Brand?

Notes on the History and Main Functions of Branding

The phenomenon of branding is probably as old as organized trade itself; it could in fact be as old as human territorial behavior.

The word brand comes from the Old Norse 'brandr' (Clifton/Simmons 2004) which means as much as 'to burn'. When the farmer of old branded his cattle, he would do so for two reasons: first of all in order for it to be recognizably his and not somebody else's cattle. Naturally, hot irons were not the only means by which to brand a product. The potter would put his mark on clay pots, e.g. in the form of his thumbprint or a symbol; the weaver would add his mark onto the cloth produced by him; in ancient Athens the wine and olive oil merchants would put a stamp on their goods in order to identify them, and so forth. In its capacity as identifier, the brand acts as a mental anchor, so to speak. Whereas the consumer might not have been able to distinguish among the quality of the different kinds of meat, pots or pieces of cloth to be had on the Athenian agora, the brand would allow the goods to step out of their generic anonymity and be seen as a specific product; i.e. a products with a name of its own. The brand, in essence, would help the consumer to make a distinction between – ostensibly – identical products. This, in turn, leads us to the second reason for the existence of the phenomenon of branding: the producers of goods (be they farmers, potters, or wine merchants) would attach their brand to their products in the hope of attracting repeat customers. In a market place – be it in ancient Greece, modern Paris or on the Web, where the consumer encounters a surplus of possibilities from which to chose in order to fulfill his or her needs, the well-known brand serves as an aid in decision making. Any brand known to us provides a waypoint in a sort of route map in a territory of infinite consumer choices. In summing up we may say that, then as now, the brand plays two roles: firstly it acts a mark of provenience and secondly it serves as a basis for consumer decision making.

Brands as Signs

Brands come in many shapes and forms, e.g. names, logos, symbols, slogans, certain combinations of colors and shapes etc. In our day and age a brand is typically understood as a corporate, product or organizational brand, i.e., something which communicates to us about an aspect of said company, product or organization. If we look upon brands as we encounter them in our daily life as consumers then to us a brand is basically a sign, i.e. "something that stands for something else" ("aliquid stat pro aliquo"). The golden arches stand for a particular fast food restaurant, for instance. And if you will allow yourself a little experiment then think of the soft drink 'cola' ... You probably thought not only (if at all!) of the matter, the substance of 'cola' but also of a particular brand of cola, didn't you?

The science of signs, or semiotics, has a history dating back over two and a half millennia, which – for obvious reasons – means that I cannot even begin to scratch its surface let alone go into any conceptual discussions. So, without further ado and for the purpose of this short article, I will therefore allow myself to interpret and synthesize two classic understandings of the nature of the sign, i.e. the one by Ferdinand de Saussure and the one proposed by Ogden and Richard (1923)¹. The sign, according to Ferdinand de Saussure (1983 [1916]), is always bilateral, consisting of content and form. If we think of the word 'dog' then it is a sign consisting of the form 'dog' – that

¹ Cf. Ditlevsen et al. 2007 for further elaborations on this model and its usage for professional communication purposes.

is the written or spoken word ‘dog’ – and the content or meaning that the word ‘dog’ carries with it. But – and here is where the contribution of Odgen and Richard is to be found – the word ‘dog’ (or any other sign for that matter) does not exist in a vacuum, it exists solely because somebody uses the word ‘dog’; and that crucial somebody is the sign user (in this case somebody in command of the English language). And she uses it in order to communicate to herself and others about the world she inhabits, in effect making the sign an instrument of reference.

If I utter the word ‘dog’, and ask you to consider what it means, there is a good chance that you – if you are in command of the English language – will envision a four legged, fur bearing animal with a wagging tail and which is able to bark. Such features would constitute the denotation or the common ground that would allow us to refer to the same entity, in this case the animal ‘dog’, when communicating. But thinking about ‘dog’ probably does not stop there for you. Along with the denotations typically come a number of connotations, i.e., accompanying meanings to ‘dog’ prevalent in your discourse community, within your cultural sphere. Connotations to ‘dog’ could be, for instance, “man’s best friend”, “an impure animal” or maybe even “food”. Breaking down the meaning of ‘dog’ even further, we come to personal associations, i.e., meanings of a personal nature ascribed to ‘dog’. Such associations could take on the form of, say, ‘Old Yellow’ – or any other dog that you grew up with –; your fear of dogs due to being bitten as a child, etc.

And it is exactly this emotional relationship between you as a sign user and the sign, or – when it comes to branding – the emotional relationship between the brand and you as a consumer, which is all-important to branding. For when you perceive a sign, then you automatically interpret it, that is you automatically ascribe meaning to it – and this meaning may very well be emotional in nature. Let’s look at some examples from the world of consumer choices. What for instance do signs such as ‘Peugeot’ or ‘HP’ mean to you, denotatively speaking? Not much really, beyond, say, ‘French car’ or ‘computer manufacturer’. But if a sleek, red Peugeot sports car was your first ever vehicle or you new HP computer is an excellent number cruncher way better than your old computer, well, then you will – while reading ‘Peugeot’ or ‘HP’ above – probably already have begun to form an emotional bond of a favorable kind with the brands in question. If, however, your encounters with French cars or HP computers in the past were marred by problems, well, your interpretation of the brands/signs is probably less favorable.

Brands as Designed Positive, Emotional Relationships

As a sign, the brand elicits an emotional response; in fact as a sign the brand is constituted by the consumer’s positive, emotional relationship with a product, a company or a service – typically at the level of connotations and associations. What branding as a discipline is concerned with is, therefore, to design and to guide consumers’ (or other stakeholders’) positive, emotional response to a product, a service or the like. At the executive level we may even say that branding is about creating and maintaining favorable relationships with the stakeholders upon which the brand in question (be it a product, a service, and idea or a cooperation) is dependent.

But in their capacity as signs brands are not what the brand designers put into them, but what we, the consumers, read into them. Or – in the words of Bertrand Russell – “the creator and the appreciator are different people”. Even if you envision and design the most beautiful and enticing brand, be it a name, a slogan or a pictogram etc., there is no certainty that this will lead your consumers to react favorably; i.e. buy your product, endorse your ideas, follow your example etc. Or as the saying goes, “you can lead the horse to water, but you can’t make it drink.”

Author



Peter Kastberg (pk@asb.dk) holds a Ph.D. in applied linguistics (technical communication). He is affiliated with the Research Area for Knowledge Communication, Aarhus School of Business, University of Aarhus, Denmark. Among his current research interests count: mediation of specialized knowledge across knowledge asymmetries, the ontogenesis of knowledge, and public understanding of science and research.

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