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The Persuasive Aspect of Brands

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The Persuasive Aspect of Brands

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Abstract

This project is a state-of-the-art review, which discusses the tactics and Theories that go into enhancing a brand's persuasive ability, and discusses how corporations go about creating an influential and successful brand identity. With constant technological innovation and evolving buyer behavior, it is important for corporations to take into account the importance of constantly developing and enhancing their brand. In this review, there is a discussion of the differences between brand and brand image, the importance of congruence between the brand and the consumer, an overview of marketing and advertising communication, and the use of endorsements and celebrities to strengthen brand awareness. Within these topics, the review contains several of the most commonly used concepts and hypotheses that are involved in each, along with a discussion of potential topics to consider as research efforts continue in the future that were not included/vaguely covered in any current research. An understanding of the idea of persuasion through brands gives corporations the knowledge to efficiently and effectively enhance their brand/image, along with giving consumers the know-how and confidence to make educated decisions for themselves in regards to products and services among the different ideologies and strategies that these corporations utilize.

Introduction

The persuasive aspect of brands is an important topic to understand not only from a corporate aspect, but as a consumer as well. In recent decades, the topic of branding has developed into one of the most dominant areas of study in the field of communication, specifically the tactics and theories that go into making a brand so persuasive. The importance of brand relationships and brand experiences are the building blocks to creating an influential and successful brand identity, and that is the basis from which consumers make their decisions when purchasing certain products or services. It is by no means an easy task to build a strong brand in today's environment due to substantial technological innovation and evolving buyer behavior, but by taking a look at the persuasive tactics being used to develop and enhance these brands, sometimes a clearer understanding can result.

In this review, there will be a discussion of the differences between brand and brand image, and why both are important in creating brand personality. This section will also include an overview of the importance of congruence between the brand and the consumer, a discussion of brand awareness, the impact of organizational culture on brand and brand image, as well as the values of a brand. Next, the review will explain brand image through marketing and advertising communication, and how the digital era has revolutionized these topics, as well as a discussion of its influence on brand equity, and why brand equity can be so important. Then, there will be an overview of brand positioning in relation to credibility, and the different models that are involved, which include: the source model, the recipient model, and the experience model, along with the concepts and hypotheses that are involved in each. Finally, there will be a discussion of the use of

endorsements and celebrities to strengthen brands and brand awareness, as well as theories that support the use of this tactic which will include: The match-up hypothesis, the meaning transfer perspective, and the halo-effect, along with a discussion of the risks associated with using spokespersons to endorse a product or service.

Brand and Brand Image

A brand is defined as “separate from the functional product, that consists of a name, term, sign, or symbol, or any combination of them, that attempts to represent the unique benefits a company can provide in terms of attributes, value, and culture” (Kotler, 1997, p. 177). Keller (2008) also points out that an important role played by a brand is that it enables consumers to identify specific products/services and can differentiate them from those of competitors. On the other hand, Brand image is defined as “the set of beliefs held about a particular brand” (Kotler, 1988, p. 197). Marguiles (1977) also states that “essentially, brand image means the sum of all the ways a company chooses to identify itself with the public...image however, is the perception of the company by the public” (p. 66).

Basically, while branding gives both the consumer and the organization benefits that include both identification and tracing, the creation of a brand image allows the marketer to essentially give life to an innate product. As a result, it is given individual personality and human-like characteristics in the eyes of the consumer. Cooper (1989) explains “in order to be successful, images and symbols must relate to and exploit the needs, values, and lifestyles of consumers in a way that the meanings involved give added value, and differentiation from other brands”(p. 510). Basically, a strong, high-demand, unique and

original brand image is indeed positively related to willingness to pay for premium prices and higher brand equity.

The concept of brands as social signals is now well accepted with lineage between brand and user self-image as a key motivational factor in consumer choice (Belk, 1983; Sirgy, 1982). A repeated but rarely stated theme in the literature on branding is that the consumer is being sold, or persuaded, at two different levels of values: intrinsic values centering on perceived product quality, and extrinsic values that are focused on the symbolic content of the brand. "Intrinsic values derive from consumer beliefs about the product's capacity to satisfy their functional needs, while extrinsic or added values derive from the brand imagery created by advertising" (Meenaghan, 1995, p. 27).

Brand image as well as brand awareness are important signals in relation to how consumers perceive the brand, which can help to predict buyer behavior. As Keller (1993) discusses, brand awareness consists of two components: brand recognition and brand recall performance. Brand recognition is defined as "consumers' capability to confirm their prior exposure to the brand when given the brand as a cue; brand recall, on the other hand, refers to whether consumers can retrieve the brand from memory when given the product category as a cue" (Keller, 1993).

Interestingly enough, it is highly possible that a brand is credible, while at the same time, having a low level of brand awareness. For example, some local brands are rarely known outside of that specific region. As Keller (1993) also explains, for a brand to be included in a consumer's "brand consideration set", it has to be easy for consumers to think of the brand when they think about a specific product category. So, when consumers

perceive that a brand has high awareness, a credible brand is more likely to have a larger impact on a buyer's purchase intentions, which indicates the effect of brand awareness.

Effects of Organizational Culture on Brand and Brand Image

When an organization makes efforts to create a unique brand and image in order to set it apart from other competitors, organizational culture becomes a key component in regards to how an organization desires to be viewed by consumers. Organizational culture is the "set(s) of artifacts, values, and assumptions that emerge from the interactions of organizational members" (Keyton 2005). These interactions among the pieces of the organization all create a type of "social order", also known as a communication construction of the organization. Because of this, the symbols, messages, and meanings all create a continuous cycle of communication performance within it.

The most important component within organizational culture that helps to create this brand image is an organization's values. Values are "strategies, goals, principles, or qualities that are considered ideal or desirable, and, as a result, create guidelines for organizational behavior" (Keyton, 2008). The values of the organization shape what type of message they want to send to the public, and determine what they will be known for in the minds of their consumers. Values that are shared among the organization ultimately become *assumptions*, which are essentially beliefs that are so deeply embedded into the organization to the point where it's members no longer notice or discuss them. This explains why virtually every organization's brand is so unique, considering each has their own set of values that they hold in order to determine the type of strategy they use on a day to day basis, their overall goals as an organization both short term and long term, and the qualities that they want each member to embody.

According to Keyton (2005), if we use a more communicative perspective, organizational culture has five important characteristics. The first characteristic he discusses emphasizes that organizational culture is directly linked to the organization's members, who participate in and establish those constructs, and help to sustain the organizational culture. The second characteristic states that organizational culture is always dynamic, and never static. The third characteristic explains that organizational culture is made up of competing assumptions and values as the organization's members eventually create "sub-cultures" that contain both overlapping and unique elements. The fourth characteristic Keyton discusses states that "organizational culture is emotionally charged, as meanings associated with artifacts, values, and assumptions are deeply connected to the feelings and relationships of organizational members". Finally, organizational culture is a direct representation of the established social order within an organization. Each of these characteristics are helpful in understanding why creating and establishing a cohesive and accepted brand image is so difficult for an organization to achieve.

Brand Image Through Marketing and Advertising Communication

Many sources of academic research outline the crucial role of marketing and advertising communications in the brand building process. Communication is in general perceived as an activity that links people together and creates relationships (Duncan & Moriarty, 1998). In this sense, marketing communications are seen as a brand's voice, and are therefore perceived as a crucial strategic tool for building brands (Keller 2008). These marketing communications tools include the technology, as well as the marketing strategies that are being used to initiate and develop this communication "link" from the

brand source to the consumer. Academics stress that marketing and advertising communications contribute to brand building if they are based on unique brand identity.

In reality, brand values are subjective, a point stressed by McDonald (1992) who suggests that “it is consumers and their habit forming tendencies who create branding; branding is inseparable from the ability to choose. What advertising does is help control the acquisition of value, and give it direction. If we did not advertise, our product would still acquire a ‘branding’, but it might not be one that we would like” (p. 114). Kardes (2002) also discusses a line of research that featured the so-called message-learning approach to persuasion, which states that any form of persuasion, including persuasion resulting from exposure to advertising, involves a four stage process: attention, comprehension, yielding, and retention. So, ads that are considered persuasive are those that are attention grabbing, easy to comprehend, convincing, and memorable.

The idea that marketing communications contribute to brand building was first presented in the 1960’s, when Joyce (1967) presented the theory that advertising changes attitudes toward brands through the AIDA model (Argyriou, Kitchen, & Melewar, 2005). The AIDA model outlines the four stages of the sales process: *attention*, *interest*, *desire*, and *action*. The first stage, *attention*, outlines the importance of grabbing the consumer’s attention in order to pull them toward the product or service; the second stage, *interest*, is what keeps the consumer’s attention; the third stage, *desire*, represents the motivation to act based on their interest; and the fourth stage, *action*, represents the consumer actually taking action and “consuming” or buying the product or service and agreeing to the source’s proposals (Argyriou, Kitchen, & Melewar, 2005). Today, marketing communications are believed to contribute to building high customer based equity (Yoo,

Donthu, & Lee, 2000). The topic of brand equity in and of itself explains the fact that consumers are purchasing the brand image associated with consuming a specific brand, for example, a Louis Vuitton handbag, so that the brand itself becomes an extension of the individual's self-image and helps to enhance self esteem (Wang & Yang, 2008). While it's common to regard advertising as a major factor in leveraging brand equity (Achenbaum, 1989; Lindsay, 1990), it's worth mentioning that consumers aren't just unconscious recipients of image-filled advertising.

If we only focus on two marketing communication tools, advertising and word of mouth marketing, which are known to be the ones that have the biggest influence on brand equity, we can already notice that there have been many changes due to the digital era (Ilfeld & Winner, 2002). As Petek and Ruzzier (2013) discuss, due to the development of this digital era, advertising media came about; Internet and cell phones and consequently online and mobile advertising emerged. Media traditionally used by advertisers, specifically television advertising, which because of it's additional functionalities, is becoming more and more adjusted to the digital era. Word of mouth marketing, which was in the past only in the domain of the consumers, has evolved in recent years as a planned marketing communications activity that can be defined as the planned act of influencing consumer-to-consumer communications by using different word of mouth marketing techniques, such as viral marketing, guerilla marketing, buzz marketing or social media marketing (Kozinets, 2010).

Word of mouth in digital environments, or electronic word of mouth as it is referred to today, is found in different online platforms such as blogs, emails, consumer review websites, forums, and other social networking sites and communities (Chu & Kim, 2011).

Electronic word of mouth is a powerful tool within marketing and advertising communication, because it allows these marketers to reach and talk to consumers both directly and indirectly to gain a better understanding in regards to their needs, wants, and buyer behavior.

Brand Positioning In Relation To Source Credibility

Brands can serve as symbols or signals for product positioning, which is defined as “an activity of creating a brand in such a manner that it occupies a distinctive place and value in the target consumer’s mind” (Erdem & Swait, 2004), and one important characteristic determining brand positioning is its credibility. Credibility issues originate from “brand credibility” literature. Brand credibility represents all of the effects of an organization’s past marketing ventures, and can also have an effect on consumer’s future brand consideration (Erdem, Swait, & Louviere, 2002). O’Keefe (1990) defines the term credibility as “judgments made by a perceiver, or a message recipient, concerning the believability of a communicator” (pp. 130-131). Three major models of credibility can be distinguished: the *source model*, the *recipient model*, and the *experience model* (Jackob, 2008).

The *source model* focuses on the communication source. Jackob (2008) explains that through the source model, credibility is considered as the result of the pre-existing, or perceived characteristics of a source, which include: *expertise*, *trustworthiness*, *good will*, and *attractiveness/likeableness*. According to Wang and Yang (2008), *expertise* refers to a source’s perceived knowledge, ability, or skill set, *trustworthiness* refers to a receiver’s trust in a sender, *good will* refers to the sender’s interest and level of caring toward the receiver, and *attractiveness/likeableness* obviously refers to the degree of visual and/or

cognitive pleasure that the sender provides, which is derived from the sender. These primary dimensions within the source model not only establish credibility, but they facilitate persuasion.

The *recipient model* focuses predominantly on persuasion through credibility as a peripheral cue (Jackob, 2008). As explained by Gass and Seiter (2011), this peripheral cue of persuasion can be explained through the elaboration likelihood model, created by Petty and Cacioppo in 1986. Gass and Seiter (2011) explain that, according to the elaboration likelihood model, there are two routes to persuasion, the central route and the peripheral route, which operate simultaneously. The central route is the most favored route, which focuses on the substance or the content of the message, and causes the receiver to engage in “cognitive elaboration”, which simply means that they think about and reflect on the ideas and information contained in the message; when the receiver does not focus on the substance or content of the message, their lack of motivation causes them to favor the peripheral route, which helps them to remain less engaged (Gass & Seiter, 2011). The elaboration likelihood model also acknowledges that in most persuasive situations, receivers tend to favor one route over the other. The route that they choose to favor ultimately depends on their level of involvement with the issue. Basically, when receivers have a high stake in the outcome, their motivation to pay attention will be higher, and they favor the central route. When receivers have little at stake, their motivation to pay attention to a message is lower, in which case they tend to favor the peripheral route. This is where credibility comes in the picture. Credibility tends to work best when receiver involvement is low (Benoit, 1987). On the other hand, Benoit (1987) explains that receivers with low involvement are more likely to defer to sources just because it requires less

mental effort than concentrating on the substance of a message. In other words, low-involved receivers are cognitively lazy.

The *experience model* emphasizes the interaction between message source and recipient. According to Niklas Luhmann (1989), credibility in this sense serves as a heuristic that helps to reduce social complexity. Based on positive experiences with communication sources, individuals attribute credibility to them. To enhance this positive experience, the source may engage in impression management. The impression management theory, designed by Tedeschi and Reiss (1981), looks to explain how people go about trying to project a positive self-image. Basically, individuals want others to form favorable impressions of them in order to be perceived as credible. Gass and Seiter (2011) take the position that by engaging in impression management, they are engaging in persuasion.

Gass and Seiter (2011) also discuss the idea of persuasion through brand loyalty within the topic of brand positioning. The concept of brand loyalty describes the way advertisers want the consumer to experience psychological discomfort if they change brands. So, by instilling brand loyalty in them, advertisers hope to discourage brand switching. A common example is American Express's slogan, "Don't leave home without it", which is designed to foster brand loyalty in the consumer, and cause feelings of psychological inconsistency if the consumers betray their usual brands. On the other hand, other advertising campaigns, typically those for newer products or products with a smaller market share, use the opposite strategy. These ads encourage brand switching by realizing that consumers can be set in their ways, and try to create psychological imbalance as a result. Essentially, they want consumers to have second thoughts about the products and

services that they have been relying on. A common example of this is Taco Bell's slogan, "Think outside the bun". This technique works to utilize source credibility as a form of persuasion to create a little voice in the back of consumer's minds that urges them to either stick with a brand, or to switch to another brand based on the message that the advertiser desires to achieve.

The Use of Endorsements To Strengthen Brands

An endorser can broadly be defined as "any individual who appears in an advertisement as a spokesperson for that product. The endorser can be a well-known actor, athlete, an individual with celebrity status, or another perceived expert such as a doctor, a scientist, or even the CEO of a firm" (Lafferty, 2008). Using credible or celebrity endorsers to promote the product is a popular advertising technique used worldwide to attract attention to the ad, enhance the persuasiveness of the message, increase recall of the ad, and make the brand stand apart from competitive products (Lafferty, 2008, p. 3).

The match-up hypothesis can help isolate the most important source characteristics in relation to customer persuasion. According to McCracken (1989), "Meaning is transferred from the endorser to the product on the basis of the roles they assume in their careers as well as their gender, age, status, personality, and lifestyle" (p. 315). One explanation for why these individuals should fit the brands that they endorse comes from the meaning transfer perspective, which states that an endorser's public persona is projected onto a brand. The brand's image is then incorporated into the consumer's self-concept (McCracken, 1989). Lafferty and Goldsmith (1999) state that "more recent research on endorsers indicates that while credible endorsers can influence perceptions of the advertisement and indirectly influence perceptions of the brand in a positive manner

the credibility of the company exerts a stronger direct effect on consumer's attitudes toward the advertisement, the brand, and their likelihood of purchasing the product" (p. 110).

While the use of endorsers is widespread, and their ability to enhance the persuasive process is generally agreed upon, using any type of endorser has its risks. An endorser's behavior may embarrass the organization and compromise the image of the brand that the endorser is promoting. Many endorsers have a "morals" clause in their contract that allows the company to terminate the contract if a controversy occurs (Lafferty, 2008). It is also important that the endorser has a degree of star power, but doesn't overshadow the product, as well as ensuring that the endorser doesn't become overexposed by representing too many products or organizations (Lafferty, 2008).

Interestingly, according to Gass and Seiter (2011), "a source's expertise doesn't always have to be in the field in which he or she is attempting to persuade" (p. 77). The example that they present is Catherine Zeta Jones, and her effectiveness as an endorser for T-Mobile even though she isn't an expert on telecommunications. This presents the idea of the halo-effect, which allows celebrity endorsers to "carry their credibility to new, unrelated fields just solely based on their status" (p. 77). The idea of goodwill or perceived caring is also a crucial aspect of a successful endorser, which McCroskey and Teven (1999) describe as "a source who seems to care about and take a genuine interest in the receiver" (p. 91). Goodwill can be demonstrated by displaying understanding for another person's ideas, feelings, or needs. It can also be demonstrated by displaying empathy, which Gass and Seiter (2011) define as "identifying with another person's feelings or situation" (p. 78). Goodwill can be displayed by responsiveness as well, by acknowledging and responding to

another's communication attempts. This not only builds and establishes perceived closeness and a connection with the consumer, but also creates rapport for the organization and its endorser as well.

Attractiveness and likeableness is also a helpful component of the credibility of an endorser, regardless of their social status. The roots of source attractiveness also trace back to social psychological research. McGuire's (1985) model proposed that a message is more effective if the source is familiar, likeable, and/or similar to the receiver. Lafferty (2008) explains that, "familiarity is knowledge about the endorser through exposure; likeability is affection for the endorser as a result of his or her physical appearance and behavior; and similarity is the supposed resemblance between the endorser and the consumer" (p. 2). Basically, if the endorser is seen as attractive and/or likeable to the consumer, then persuasiveness is enhanced. Research has also found that endorser attractiveness enhances evaluations of the product when the attractiveness of the endorser was related to the product, as in the case of shampoo or cosmetics (Petty & Wegener, 1985).

Discussion

As discussed in this review, there are several building blocks that go into creating a successful and influential brand, as well as theories and strategies that make these brands so persuasive. An important role played by a brand is that it enables consumers to identify specific products/services, and helps them to differentiate them from competitors. Brand image, on the other hand, is basically the sum of all the ways that a company chooses to identify itself with the public. Essentially, the consumer is being sold at two different levels

of values, intrinsic values centering on perceived product quality, and extrinsic values that are focused on the symbolic content of the brand.

Brand image as well as brand awareness are important signals that show how consumers perceive the brand, and brand awareness, as we discussed, consists of two components: brand recognition and brand recall performance. So, when consumers perceive that a brand has high awareness, a credible brand is more likely to have a larger impact on a buyer's purchase intentions. The review also takes into consideration how marketing communications are seen as a brand's voice, and are perceived as a crucial tool for building brands, and they contribute to brand building if they are based on unique brand identity. Advertising as a whole, helps control the acquisition of value, and give that value direction. The importance of taking organizational culture into account when an organization is creating their brand and desired brand image is also an important aspect to remember when discussing this aspect of brand development.

Today, marketing and advertising communications are believed to help build high customer based equity, which explains why consumers are purchasing the brand image associated with the brand that they are consuming. Advertising and word of mouth marketing have the biggest effect on brand equity, and there have been many changes to these avenues due to the digital era. Word of mouth in digital environments (electronic word of mouth) is found on various online platforms, and is considered a powerful tool within marketing and advertising because it allows marketers to reach and talk to consumers both directly and indirectly.

As the review also discussed, brands can serve as symbols or signals for product positioning, and one important characteristic determining this positioning is credibility.

Brand credibility represents all the effects of an organization's past marketing ventures, and can have an effect on future brand consideration. Three models of credibility were also covered, which included the *source model*, the *recipient model*, and the *experience model*. Within the *source model*, credibility is the result of characteristics of the source, such as expertise, trustworthiness, good will, and attractiveness/likeableness. The *recipient model* focused on persuasion through credibility as a peripheral cue of persuasion that is explained through the elaboration likelihood model, which discussed the two routes of persuasion, the central route and the peripheral route, which operate simultaneously. The *experience model* emphasized the interaction between message source and recipient, which, in this sense, serves as a heuristic that helps to reduce social complexity, which causes the source to engage in impression management. This looks to explain how individuals attempt to project a positive self-image through the impression management theory. Within the topic source credibility, it is also important to realize how advertisers use the idea of brand loyalty to either persuade consumers to stick with a brand that they have been using, or to switch to another brand based on the message that they want the consumer to consider.

The review also discussed the use of endorsements to strengthen brands, which, by using credible or celebrity status endorsers to promote a product will attract attention to the ad, enhance its persuasiveness, increase recall, and make the brand stand apart from its competitors. Consumer persuasion through this technique brings about the match-up hypothesis, where meaning is transferred from the endorser to the product based on either knowledge or relation to the advertisement itself. The meaning transfer perspective explains why these spokespersons should fit with the brand that they are endorsing,

because the endorser's public persona is projected onto a brand, where the brand image is then incorporated into the consumer's self-concept. The halo-effect was also covered, which allows a spokesperson to carry their credibility to new and unrelated fields based solely on their status. The idea of good will and perceived caring is also crucial to build and establish perceived closeness with the consumer, along with attractiveness and likeableness based on research that proves the enhancement of persuasion based on these characteristics.

Future Research

While there has been relatively extensive research conducted on the topics and ideas presented, there is still much more to learn as research efforts continue in the future. There are changes occurring in this field as a result of the constant evolution of technology and media, along with ideas that may have been left "between the cracks" of other existing information that should be expanded upon.

First, research in the future could potentially look into the relationship or connection between the endorser and the brand they are representing, specifically if the endorser is not an expert or in a related field associated with the brand itself. Second, research could expand on the importance of understanding the effect or impact of "word of mouth", especially the effects of "electronic word of mouth" on a brand, and how this helps a company or brand develop, keep, or even correct the image that they want. Third, it is important to look into company brand impact on or versus product brand, and the potential that one "bad" product's brand/image could destroy a "good" product's brand/image for the company. This means discovering exactly how much of the company's brand/image influences the individual product's brand, and how much that really matters.

Along with this idea, future research can determine how much the spokesperson or endorser's "bad" behavior impacts a company or product's brand/image. Fourth, all frameworks discussed so far rely on conscious consumer processing as a basis for understanding persuasion effects, but what about the unconscious influence of advertising on consumer behavior? Lastly, since most companies spend a large amount of money on building their ideal brand/image, how much does branding really impact consumer's purchasing decisions? This can include other important variables including cost, convenience, target audience, or even the type of product such as cars, jewelry, or a cleaning product.

Conclusion

As our understanding in regards to the idea of persuasion through brands continues to grow, it is important to keep in mind that there is always more to learn. The field of communication, and the theories and ideologies within it, can be applied to a vast majority of professional fields thanks to the highly applicable and consistent practices that it presents. Specifically within the fields of marketing and advertising, the topic of persuasion through communication is held as one of the most highly sought after skills that a corporation should utilize in order to make their brand as successful as possible. The knowledge gained through further research on the ideas presented will give corporations the opportunity to effectively and efficiently grow their brand/image, along with giving consumers the know-how and confidence to make educated decisions for themselves in regards to products or services that may use these exact ideologies, tactics, and strategies.

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