



Brand is Expectation

**Brands and branding
from the consumer's perspective**

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If you're like me you've probably read more articles than you can recall about the idea of brand. You've heard it referred to as a promise, a set of beliefs, a logo, a tagline, the product's positioning and much more. But a brand isn't any one of these things, but the collection of these aspects that ultimately form expectation about a product or service in a consumer's mind. Simply put, this expectation IS the brand.

More finitely, it's important to point out that engaged brands, that is, brands that have engaged a consumer, rather than existing unknown, require a consumer to be active rather than passive. The more engaging a brand is, the more we can call it a brand. Furthermore, because every brand is "for sale" in some way, those engaged with it are always in a state of consideration. People don't just perceive brands, like many espouse. They consider them. While they are considering, they are forming expectations. These expectations, though not terribly tangible, are the brand. The more expectation you build, the bigger and more multifarious and memorable your brand becomes.

When someone says to you "tell me about your brand" he is asking you to tell him about the expectations people have of your company's brand name product. What do people believe about it? What are the typical experiences surrounding it? What does it promise customers? What do customers promise it in return? What other products are associated with it? In fact, this list of questions can go on and on and diverge many times based on the nature, longevity and notoriety of the brand. Great brands have great expectations (inadvertent literary reference) and poor brands have poor or divergent expectations.

To put all of this in a bit neater package, I've identified four diverse dimensions that coalesce to form expectation, and thus brand. They are: Brand History, Marketing Communications, Competition and Brand Promise.

Brand History

Brand History can be the best or worst aspect of a brand. Certainly, what you expect of a product, and thus its brand, is based on that product's history. This history can cause you to expect superstar endorsements and \$2 million TV commercials or starving kids and sweatshops. Or, in the case of Nike, both.

Nike was the first shoemaker that really made a splash in the athletic shoe industry. Before Nike, you bought your sneakers or gym shoes at the K-Mart, Sears or Kinney store. But with Nike, and with the retail presence of places like Footlocker, all of that changed. Suddenly, or so it seemed, sneakers were no longer sneakers. They were running shoes, tennis shoes or cross-trainers. They were also the way to 'just do it'—to get out there and be active on a larger-than-life scale. Nike had Michael Jordan, Beatles songs and a swoosh stripe that was as ubiquitous as the stripes on your national flag.

But in terms of the actual product, Nike shoes were never really THAT different than Adidas, Reebok, New Balance or any of its other early competitors. Instead, Nike had economies of scale that allowed it heavily weighted marketing budgets. These budgets launched it into the public consciousness like no other company in the industry.

Unfortunately, Nike also had many problems revolving around its use of Asian workers. This was exacerbated by the fact that it was a well-known company. This popularity made it a poster child for campaigns against sweatshops. Ironically, people rebuked and shunned the company for the exact practices that gave it the financial freedom to become so top-of-mind to those people in the first place.

Together, Nike's marketing efforts and its production practices have equated into an immense amount of brand history—some good, some bad. This has, in turn, become expectation about the brand. What the Nike brand is today is

partly what it once was. And what it once was helps to form our expectations of it today. Those expectations are part of its brand.

In conclusion, one of the most important things for marketers to remember about Brand History is that it is not universal—especially when dealing with a brand that crosses generations. Today, a 40-year old, who was privy to Nike’s early days thinks differently about Nike than a 20-year old, who might have very sparse Brand History with the company. The younger of these two generations doesn’t have the same history, the same perceptions, and consequently, the same expectations. The Nike brand is thus very different for these two groups.

Marketing Communications

This is probably the most obvious and conscious way people form expectation about a product. Marketing Communications are advertising, promotions, interactive materials, direct marketing, sales, brand design, packaging design and PR. These include all the “conversations” you have with your customer, and are the ways that a company attempts to position its product in the marketplace to increase sales and build its product’s brand.

It would be difficult to argue against the notion that Marketing Communications help to form expectation about a product, so I won’t spend time defending this premise. There are countless ongoing examples of MarCom tools effecting the customer and changing their perception and expectation of a product. But one very recent (2008), and clever, one is the case of Shreddies.

In Canada, Shreddies was a lagging, 67-year old snack brand. Once a national favorite, the brand had minimal marketing support, and was slowly falling into obscurity, while newer brands captured market share.

Enter the intern. An Ogilvy Toronto intern suggested the idea of turning the square snack on its side and renaming and repackaging Shreddies under the moniker Diamond Shreddies. With advertising, promotions, a new website and new packaging to support it, Diamond Shreddies (mind you, the exact same square product turned onto one of its corners) sold out four-months supply in two months and increased sales by 18%.

But even better than the temporary increased sales, Shreddies changed the expectation of its brand. Before, people thought very little of the brand, thinking it staid and boring. From now on, the target will expect so much more fun from the brand. Consumer's expectations have changed and, POOF, like magic, so does the brand. Which means Ogilvy has their job cut out for them.

I hope they have a good intern pool to pick from.

Competition

Competition is the only real external factor that helps create expectation, and thus brand. But unlike the other aspects, Competition is not controlled directly or wholly by the company. It is only reacted to. Sometimes that reaction is not to react, or to react little. Other times, Competition forces product or service brands to react strongly. The stronger the reaction, the more the reaction affects the reacting brand, and the more those reactions cause expectation in the mind of the consumer. Case in point, Apple computer.

Many years back Apple started “taking on” Microsoft, Windows and the PC industry. But their attack was passive aggressive and heady. Frankly it existed primarily in the minds of Mac fanatics themselves. But a few years ago they stopped dancing around the ring, and started laying some sounds jabs in the face of Windows/PC with a TV/Web campaign.

This campaign, utilized a personification of a Mac and a PC, and started out each ad by illustrating that simple point: “Hi, I’m a Mac. And, I’m a PC.” After that, the commercial focused on the deficiencies of the PC and the benefits of Macs. Sometimes, this was done overtly; sometimes it was clever and subtle. In both cases, Mac owners left feeling proud, and usually giggling maniacally. After many years of producing, what most Mac owners would call, a superior product, Mac was finally getting their licks in.

Though the creativity of the commercials garnered most of the press about the campaign, it was it’s lasting effect on the brand that was most important in the long run. Mac had for once, stood up to PCs and Microsoft. Though this didn’t change the expectations of current Mac fanatics that much, it greatly changed the expectations of owners on the fence, as well as new and potential owners. In a culture where bragging and boasting have become commonplace, Apple now took part in the game and gave as good as it got. This created an exciting expectation for the brand. Now people didn’t just expect the artsy and quirky fringe computer, they expected a platform and product that openly and boldly stood up for itself. And thus, a brand that truly competed.

For people on the Competition’s side of the fence, they now looked at Mac as a viable contender. Whereas most PC owners simply ignored

Mac, or didn't know about it at all, they now gave it greater consideration than ever before.

By using Competition to change expectation for those in the target group, as well as for those often opposed or indifferent to the product, Apple has greatly increased awareness and built an overall stronger desktop computer brand.

Brand Promise

Brand Promise is where expectation, and brand building begins. Simply put, it is the promise the brand makes to the customer. Sometimes those promises are specific, but mostly they are broader and strategic so that they can be delivered throughout the marketing mix. But before we get to how Brand Promise works with expectation, here are a few examples of Brand Promise.

<i>Volvo:</i>	<i>Safety</i>
<i>BMW:</i>	<i>Ultimate driving machine</i>
<i>Apple:</i>	<i>Innovation and great design</i>
<i>FedEx:</i>	<i>When it absolutely, positively has to get there overnight.</i>
<i>Avis:</i>	<i>We try harder.</i>
<i>Amazon:</i>	<i>Everything under one "roof"</i>
<i>Las Vegas:</i>	<i>What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas</i>
<i>Barack Obama:</i>	<i>Change</i>

You get the idea.

Further, there are two different ways companies elucidate Brand Promise; the post-affect way or the pre-affect way. The post-affect way says that whatever positive affect the brand has had on people to date IS the Brand Promise. This allows companies the luxury of 20/20 hindsight. Basically, a company looks at what they already offer and how they communicate to their target, and calls that the Brand Promise. If, in this instance, this Brand Promise was something developed prior, then their pronouncement should come with some pride—the brand is actually fulfilling the promise. Otherwise, this method is simply a function of the five senses rather than actual brand strategy. For better or worse, this is how many companies identify their brand promises.

The pre-affect way is the written/premeditated way. This way of viewing Brand Promise goes as such 1. A bunch of smart people from the company and from their associated media agencies sit around and figure out what their brand should be by identifying brand essence, personality, values, requisites, and differentiators, just to name a few. The culmination of this exercise elicits the Brand Promise. 2. They write it down and called it a Brand Promise.

Of course, after this step comes the hard part—you have to deliver on your promise throughout the organization and across all marketing touch points. This is really the starting point for Marketing Communications. It is also the filter through which Competition should be viewed and the strategic catalyst for Brand History.

The process of delivering the Brand Promise builds expectation in the customer's mind and thus forms the brand. That is, the promise is delivered and people expect exactly what the promise says. Or, it doesn't deliver, and people expect something that is not the promise—the latter of which can be very dangerous for a brand because you're saying one thing

and doing another. This confuses consumers and/or makes the brand untrustworthy and unmemorable.

Over the last 100 years, few brands offer a better example of delivering on the Brand Promise than Volvo. In 1920, Assar Gabrielson and Gustaf Larson, the founders of Volvo, established the following vision: “Cars are driven by people—the guiding principle behind everything we make, therefore, is and must always remain safety.” This Brand Promise has been around since the beginning and is still espoused today. Several years back, one of their agencies created a print ad that utilized a safety pin bent into the shape of a Volvo. This simple ad, with no copy, could have only worked for Volvo. It would have seemed false for most other companies. Most companies wouldn’t have been able to pay it off. But for Volvo, it was a natural.

Over the past decade or so Volvo has been able to nicely weave the fact that their cars are actually fun to drive into their brand, with taglines like Volvo For Life. Clearly, this line speaks to safety, but it also intimates living life to its fullest and enjoying the driving experience. These positions also made a nice segue into Volvo’s environmental stance. Yet, even though their marketing communications began speaking about things other than safety, these messages still feel true to the Brand Promise and true to what Volvo is all about, and they work towards furthering the power of the brand.

When a new brand establishes a Brand Promise, or when an old brand revitalizes theirs, they bear the burden of not just acknowledging or elucidating that promise, but also delivering on it. As in the case of Volvo, delivering on their promise has paid off in spades. Because the promise is so strong and well understood, there is little miscommunication with their target. This strong clear message resonates

and builds with each successful communication to form an uncomplicated and unsullied expectation in the target's mind. This expectation mixes with other expectations to form the brand.

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Mr. Vucsko is an accomplished creative and marketing professional with 20 years of experience working in advertising, sales promotion, web design and brand strategy. His experience spans over 80 corporate clients and five continents. Mr. Vucsko was an adjunct professor of marketing communications at Columbia College Chicago for 13 years. He holds an MBA from Indiana University's Kelley School of Business.

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