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Getting Brand Assets Right
Leveraging your distinctive brand identity to grow your brand

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Brands exist in an ever-changing, dynamic environment where disruptive competition and blending categories have become the norm. To stay alive and flourish, brands need to stand out and make a long-lasting impression on consumers.

In his book, *How Brands Grow: What Marketers Don't Know*, Byron Sharp advises marketers to create and use distinctive brand assets to help grow their brands. Brand assets are sensory cues that get noticed by and stay top of mind with consumers – think, for instance, about McDonald's Golden Arches, Coke's bottle shape or Ikea's use of yellow and blue colors. Developing quickly recognizable and easily recalled brand assets is an impactful way to break through the clutter and tap into consumers' System 1 decision-making processes. Brand assets have the potential to drive brand growth, as they can:

- Strengthen mental networks (the unique set of memories, emotions, experiences, images, colors, symbols, etc. that influence the mental availability of your brand)
- Improve brand attribution in communication, i.e., enable your brand to intuitively come to mind when people are exposed to communication
- Make people think of the brand when they are shopping the category
- Make it easier for consumers to find the brand in the store

Getting brand assets right is critical: they should support what the brand wants to stand for and not lead to opposite associations, which can damage a brand. For example, clothing retailer Gap changed its logo in 2010 – and the resulting online backlash forced it to drop the new logo in just one week. Our approach to evaluating brand assets not only guides marketers on which assets to use and pursue, but also which assets to reconsider and avoid – helping them to optimize a portfolio of assets to steer their brand to success.

Differentiation is often temporary, distinctiveness is long-lasting

Differentiation is a unique benefit or "reason to buy" for the consumer. It has for a long time been the ultimate goal for brands. The belief has been that if consumers see your brand as being meaningfully different, they are more likely to choose your brand.

While differentiation is a key success factor for new products, in mature markets there are so many competitors meeting the same consumer needs that it becomes more and more challenging to differentiate brands in a meaningful way. Which truly unique emotional, functional or social identity needs can be identified in fragmented markets like beer or yogurt?

In new categories differentiation is initially a viable option, but rarely sustainable. Think about the GoPro brand. As the first player in the action camera category, GoPro used to differentiate itself both in terms of functional delivery as well as emotional promise – but gradually new players like Drift and Garmin have copied the functional delivery of the brand. For a while GoPro could still rely on its strong emotional claim ("Be a Hero"), but this too started to erode with Tom Tom's Bandit talking about "Live Adventures Worth Sharing" and Sony about "Prove Yourself". For GoPro to sustain their leading position in the market, they could not just rely on being differentiated.

A more sustainable way to continue to stand out from the competition is not through differentiation, but by developing a distinctive identity, by using sensory identifiers that trigger the brand in the consumer's mind (e.g., visual, auditory, or touch). These distinctive identity elements, called brand assets, make it easy for a brand to be recognized or recalled. Moreover, unlike differentiation, these distinctive identity elements can be legally owned. If it can no longer differentiate in how it meets emotional, functional or social identity needs, the strongest competitive advantage GoPro still has over competitors is its distinctiveness (e.g., GoPro's logo, color scheme, unique design, etc.).

Another example of a brand with strong assets that has helped it thrive is Jack Daniels. While other brands have copied its flavored whiskey, Jack Daniels stands out with its distinctive brand assets, which include its unique logo font, the white filigree border on its packaging label, and its square bottle shape.

How brand assets work

Thanks to the latest thinking in neuroscience and behavioral psychology, we have a more accurate understanding of how people choose brands based on System 1 and System 2 decision-making. A brand exists in a person's mind as a mental network: a unique memory structure of thoughts, feelings, experiences, images, stories, associations, colors, sounds, symbols and memories. People use these mental brand networks as nonconscious shortcuts to make brand choices.

In today's complex world people often rely on their gut reaction to make brand decisions: rather than spending a lot of time consciously reflecting on which brands to buy, people often decide on auto-pilot, by using mental shortcuts. The stronger the brand network, the more likely the brand will be considered at the moment of choice. Distinctive brand assets strengthen these networks – and make it easier for people to reach for your brand.

Our point of view is that brand assets do not necessarily have to be meaningful – sometimes it is fine when a brand asset only evokes the brand name without also evoking the brand image. However, it certainly helps when brand assets support what the brand wants to stand for. Nespresso provides a good example: the brand has a rich and diverse collection of distinctive brand assets, all of which support the sophistication that the brand wants to be known for.

Figure 1 - Nespresso's collection of brand assets

Identifying distinctive brand assets

Marketers need to identify the distinctive assets that give their brand a unique and ownable identity. Ipsos has developed a new approach that helps clients prioritize a set of unique brand assets that strengthen the brand and which can then be reinforced through communication, packaging, etc.

Defining brand distinctiveness

Our first step is to define distinctiveness using four measures. Our Brand Linkage and Brand Uniqueness measures relate to the Branding Power of the asset; our Sentiment and Brand Alignment measures relate to Brand Affinity. (See Figure 2.)

1. Brand Linkage: Does the asset intuitively evoke the brand?

We measure this through Implicit Reaction Time, which is a neuroscience technique that measures nonconscious associations. This System 1 approach uncovers which assets people intuitively and more strongly associate with the brand by measuring the response time to questions in milliseconds. A fast response means the brand subconsciously comes to mind when being exposed to the asset.

2. Brand Uniqueness: How unique is the brand association with the asset?

We determine this by comparing the level of brand association with our client's brand to the level of association with other brands. If an asset too often evokes competitors, it is more useful for them than for the client brand.

3. Sentiment: Does the asset give impulse to negativity?

We determine this through percent of dislikes (i.e., negative sentiment). People do not need to especially like the asset, but brands should typically try to avoid negative associations, as they can give people intuitive reasons for switching away from the brand.

4. Brand Alignment: Does the asset connect with what the brand wants to stand for?

Through our Censydiam framework[1] (or any other list of specific associations that the brand is looking for) we measure how aligned the meaning of the brand asset is with what the brand wants to stand for. Ideally, the asset conveys the image that the brand is aiming for and in doing so subconsciously reinforces key brand associations. We certainly do not want the asset to convey an image which is diametrically opposite to what the brand wants to stand for.

Figure 2 – Four measures to identify distinctive brand assets and diagnose brand asset strength

1. Ipsos' Censydiam Framework measures human motivations related to a specific category, which helps marketers to make brand decisions based on fundamental consumer needs.

Guiding brand assets strategy

Our second step is to diagnose the potential strength of each asset.

Based on the Branding Power (Brand Linkage and Brand Uniqueness) and Brand Affinity (Sentiment and Brand Alignment) we classify assets into a decision assessment matrix to leverage and create assets.

Distinctive Icons: Core brand assets that have become a unique symbol for the brand; these assets should be used at every possible opportunity (in advertising, packaging, etc.).

Invest: Assets that have the potential to become Distinctive Icons given sufficient investment. These are assets for which Brand Uniqueness is high, but overall Brand Linkage is still low. By consistently using these brand assets we are 'training' consumers about what the brand stands for and ultimately brand linkage will improve.

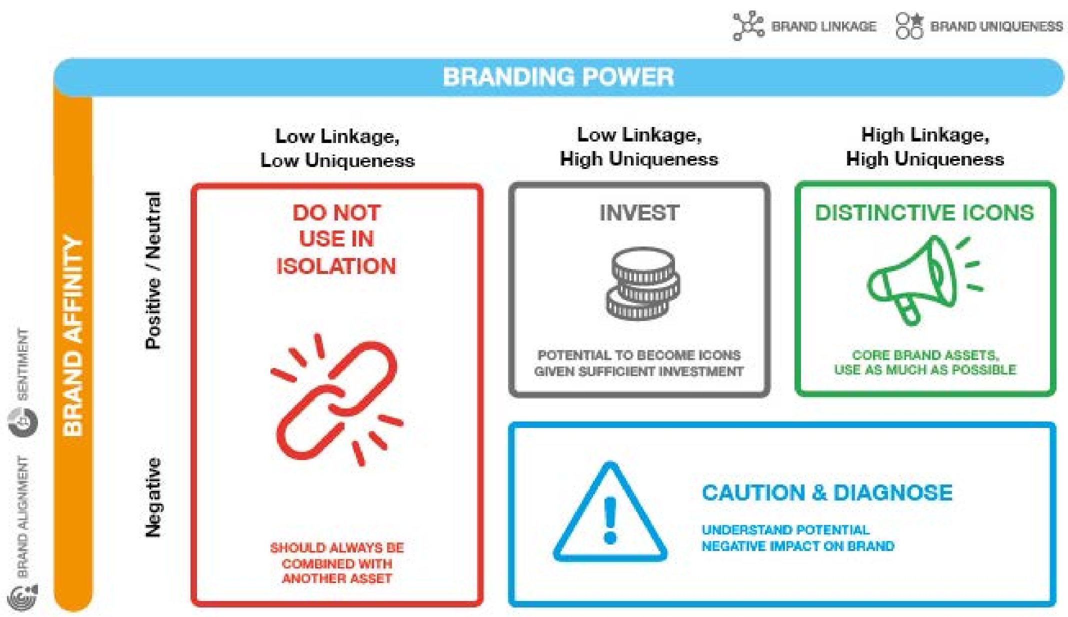
Do Not Use in Isolation: Brand assets that should always be used with another asset. When they are used in isolation they are more useful for competition than for the client's brand.

Caution & Diagnose: These assets generate negativity which could potentially hurt the brand. Before using this kind of asset, we need to understand what the potential negative impact on the brand could be.

We can bring the connection between brand assets research and strategy formation to life through an example from a recent project for a global beer brand. The beer brand wanted to build a stronger identity by making better use of existing brand assets. Our research found that many of the brand's current assets (e.g. logo, glass, bottle) generated high brand linkage, but did not support the brand message or create strong positive sentiment. Armed with this knowledge, the client was able to create a brand assets strategy whereby they could complement existing brand assets that generate high brand linkage with new and more meaningful brand assets that would generate a positive impact on brand image.

In summary, managing your distinctive assets is a very important element in building strong brands. Our approach helps marketers select a portfolio of brand assets that not only evokes the brand but also subconsciously reinforces what the brand wants to be known for.

Figure 3 – Decision Matrix guides brand assets strategy



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Ipsos MarketQuest aims at driving business growth through a deep understanding of people, brands and markets.

Our experts help clients to uncover, size and prioritize growth opportunities in the market, identify innovation platforms, optimize their brand positioning and strengthen their brand portfolio and architecture.

Ipsos is the only global agency with a dedicated practice in this area, under-pinned by a powerful and validated philosophy centered on human motivations in disruptive markets. Our solutions are linked to business outcomes through advanced analytics, activation workshops and real time simulations.

This paper is part of the Ipsos Views series.
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