

The Importance of Brand Image

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Abstract: Brand identity and brand image are two essential components in the realm of brand communication, both significantly influencing how a company is perceived by its target audience. Brand identity refers to the strategic and intentional portrayal that a company aims to create and maintain in the minds of consumers. It encompasses the values, personality traits, visual elements (like logos and typography), messaging, and promise that a company wants to convey. This desired perception helps companies differentiate themselves from competitors and foster emotional connections with their customers. On the other hand, brand image is the actual, often intangible, reputation that a company garners among consumers based on their experiences, interactions, and perceptions. It's the collective impression formed by stakeholders and the public regarding the brand's quality, reliability, customer service, and corporate social responsibility efforts. A strong, positive brand image can be a powerful driver of customer loyalty, trust, and advocacy.

Both Virgin America and Haier have effectively leveraged various strategies across different platforms and touchpoints to enhance their brand identities and shape their brand images. By aligning their actions with their intended brand identities, they've created lasting impressions that resonate deeply with their customers, fostering strong brand loyalty and driving business growth. Their unique strategies aim to enhance their brand identities and create brand images that resonate with customers.

1. Introduction

In today's fiercely competitive marketplace, brands are no longer mere products or services; they are complex entities with personalities and narratives that resonate deeply with consumers. The relationship between brand identity and brand image is a nuanced and intricate dance, where each step is choreographed to build a compelling story that influences consumer perception and drives brand loyalty. This dynamic duo plays an instrumental role in shaping the overall brand communication strategy, ultimately determining the success or failure of a business venture.

Brand identity serves as the blueprint, the strategic foundation upon which a company builds its presence. It encapsulates the essence of what the brand stands for – its values, personality, voice, and promise. It is the internal, intentional, and controllable aspect that a company crafts meticulously to differentiate itself from competitors and project its desired character to the world. Conversely, brand image is the external reflection of this identity, how consumers perceive and experience the brand. It is the aggregate of all thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and experiences that stakeholders associate with the brand. Unlike brand identity, brand image is not entirely under the

direct control of the company, but rather emerges organically through customer interactions, reviews, media coverage, and word-of-mouth.

The synergy between brand identity and image lies in their mutual reinforcement. A well-defined brand identity can guide the creation of a consistent and favorable brand image. Conversely, a strong brand image, built on positive consumer experiences, can reinforce and authenticate the intended brand identity. However, misalignments between these two facets can lead to confusion, mistrust, and weakened market positioning.

This article delves into the intricate interplay between brand identity and brand image, exploring how companies strategically develop and manage their identities to influence the public perception and reputation. Through real-world case studies and theoretical insights, we will illuminate the process by which brands navigate the delicate balance between crafting a distinctive identity and fostering a coherent and desirable image. Ultimately, understanding this relationship is vital for businesses seeking to cultivate enduring connections with customers, enhance brand equity, and secure a competitive edge in the ever-evolving global market landscape.

2. Unraveling the Intricate Interplay between Brand Identity and Image

Brand identity and brand image, two critical elements in the architecture of brand communication, form a symbiotic relationship that significantly influences consumer perception and drives marketing effectiveness. According to Kapferer (2008)^[7], brand image acts as a receptor, capturing the essence of a brand through its name, communication style, logo, and other visual cues. When individuals attempt to describe or define a brand, it is the brand image that springs to mind—a mental construct shaped by all the associations attached to the brand. Keller (1993)^[8] underscores the importance of a positive brand image, noting that it's intrinsically linked with word-of-mouth recommendations and social influences, which can bolster marketing communication efforts.

A favorable brand image not only amplifies awareness but also impacts customer behavior. Simonson et al. (1988)^[14] highlight that consumers actively seek out distribution channels for products and services based on high brand awareness and a positive brand image. Moreover, Starr and Rubinson (1978)^[16] demonstrate that customers are willing to pay premium prices for brands that possess a distinct and differentiated brand image, validating the economic value of an effectively crafted brand image.

Brand identity, conversely, refers to the strategic intent behind how a company wishes to be perceived by consumers across its diverse product lines, actions, and communications (Kapferer, 2008)^[7]. It is the blueprint that guides a brand's journey towards differentiation. The initial stage involves resonating with customers by projecting affirmative attributes and actions that set the brand apart from competitors. Establishing relationships based on customer value is key; this implies that companies must secure support by nurturing customer-centric relationships. John and Monga (2006)^[10] emphasize that maintaining a positive brand image is paramount throughout this process, requiring businesses to understand their target audience, tailor their messaging accordingly, and consistently reinforce the desired image.

In essence, brand identity is crafted and transmitted by the sender (the company), while the brand image is the received message that forms the consumer's understanding of the brand. The company exercises control over brand identity, meticulously designing it to position the brand favorably among consumers. On the other hand, brand image is more organic and emerges as the public's collective perception, forged after the establishment of brand identity.

An illustrative example is Coca-Cola, whose brand identity aims to project an energetic, refreshing, and joyful persona. However, Vedwan (2010)^[18] points out that despite these intentions, some consumers perceive Coca-Cola as a high-calorie, less health-conscious beverage option. This

disparity highlights the complexity and challenge inherent in managing the relationship between brand identity and image. Companies must strive to align their internally crafted identities with the external perceptions that constitute the brand image, ensuring that their intended message is accurately received and interpreted by the market.

In a word, the relationship between brand identity and brand image is a dynamic and reciprocal one. A well-defined brand identity serves as the foundation upon which a compelling brand image is built, while the actual brand image reflects the degree of alignment between the company's aspirations and consumers' experiences. Both components are vital to effective brand communication, as they collectively influence consumer decision-making and ultimately contribute to a brand's success or failure. Therefore, businesses need to continuously monitor, adapt, and refine their strategies to ensure a harmonious interplay between brand identity and image, thereby maximizing brand equity and competitive advantage.

3. The Relationship between Brand storytelling and Image

Brand storytelling is a powerful communication strategy that leverages the power of narrative to forge emotional connections and foster meaningful relationships between brands and their customers. It transcends traditional marketing by weaving together the core values, ideas, emotions, experiences, and unspoken imagery associated with a brand, effectively capturing hearts and minds (Woodside et al., 2008)^[20]. This dynamic form of communication acts as a critical business tool that allows companies to differentiate themselves in a crowded marketplace, evoke emotional involvement, and nurture lasting customer relationships. At its essence, brand storytelling involves crafting narratives that resonate deeply with consumers, enabling them to become more than passive listeners; they transform into active participants in the brand's story (Schank, 1999)^[15]. Human memory is inherently wired for stories, making this approach an effective means to embed brand messages within the consumer psyche. By using creative language and symbols, brand storytelling helps customers familiarize themselves with a brand, easing their anxieties and fostering a sense of trust and intimacy.

Kornberger (2010)^[9] emphasizes the role of storytelling in reducing cognitive barriers, as stories simplify complex information and create an accessible and engaging environment for consumers. Mythology plays a pivotal role in this context, serving as a potent method of both implicit and explicit storytelling. Brands can harness the power of myth to represent their unique cultural beliefs and behaviors, creating a narrative tapestry that speaks directly to their audience's collective consciousness (Cayla & Arnould, 2008)^[2]. Cayla and Arnould (2008) further elaborate on the concept of brand mythology, suggesting that it enables businesses to capture market share across local, regional, and global markets. By constructing a brand mythology framework, organizations can identify and articulate their brand's strengths and weaknesses in terms of mythic positioning. This strategic approach to storytelling provides a rich foundation for developing targeted communication tactics that reinforce the brand's identity and distinctiveness^[2].

Pechoin is one of the famous skin care brands in China with almost 90 years of history, and holds the eastern skin care concept of nature and gentleness. The myth of Pechoin can not only reflect the brand belief, but also provide the strategy to position the market (Guan, 2014)^[6]. STP (market segmentation, targeting and positioning) theory will be used in this part to illustrate how Pechoin uses myth to position their market. Chinese consumers prefer the brand story related to the collectivism (Chen, 2006)^[3]. Thus, the allusion of Pechoin is a Chinese idiom which refers to birds pay homage to the Phoenix (or king). Although Phoenix was normal in appearance a long time ago, it was hardworking and picked up fruits that were thrown away by other birds. Suddenly, the forest was droughty and birds were not able to find the food, at this moment, Phoenix shared the fruits that

were accumulated for years with other birds to pass through the difficult period. After the drought, with the purpose of appreciating the help from Phoenix, hundreds of birds pulled one of their beautiful feathers down to make a dazzling dress to Phoenix and elected it as the bird king with one accord. Moreover, the birds flew from every direction to celebrate and congratulate the birthday of Phoenix every year. Thus, feathers of birds contain the essence of oil that treat the skin problems was the original assumption of the product in Pechoin (Maigoo, 2017)^[13]. Furthermore, Pechoin takes advantage of differentiated marketing tactics, which provide different products to different market segments respectively by using different marketing strategies (Long & Gao, 2015)^[12]. They are upgrading from the low-end and mid-market to the mid and high-end market and it can be mainly divided into 3 customer groups: 17-25 young women group who seek the natural and high-performance skin care products, 25-45 females who have stable income can be regarded as the high-end market and 45-60 old group who are nostalgic and search for the herbal and natural ingredients (Wu, 2014)^[21].

In summary, brand storytelling weaves together the threads of human experience, emotion, and cultural meaning to create a compelling narrative around a brand. By adopting this narrative-centric method, brands can not only stand out amidst competition but also cultivate a devoted following that identifies with and actively engages in the brand's ongoing story. Through the careful crafting and strategic use of myths and symbols, brands can build a robust and enduring connection with their audience, thus enhancing their market position and driving long-term customer loyalty.

4. How does Brands Use Multiple Stakeholder Touchpoints to Build Compelling and Differentiated Brand Images

Brand image is the result from fame, reputation, scilicet, and minds of people (Bullmore, 2001)^[1], which suggests that the multiple stakeholder touchpoint related to the brand plays an important role.

Virgin America Airline was based in California with the mission 'fly away with me again' (Dennis et. al, 2008)^[4]. In order to achieve the brand image of innovation, high-standard service and friendly relationship with consumers, communication method and equipment were improved.

Virgin flight Safety Video was published in 2013 with more than 12 million views to date, which used Broadway play to differentiate itself from their competitors in style and musicality. The video took advantage of cheerful performance including songs, raps, singers and dances to illustrate safety tips (Lacy, 2016)^[11]. For instance, in order to persuade passengers to fasten the seatbelt in case of the unexpected turbulence or weather conditions, a woman, who had dramatic motions to play the way of operating the seatbelt appropriately. In addition, contrary to solemn no-cigarette tips from other airplane companies, a little boy had an interaction with a female who attempted to smoke and used a funny rap to express it was not allowed to smoke in the airplane. The most attractive part was men in black sang stylish rap and danced to tell passengers where and how to use the life vest (Lacy, 2016)^[11].

On the other hand, Virgin America had a cooperation with Netflix to provide customers with the internet speed what they expected at home, moreover, it was available to watch and stream online on connected device directly with 8 to 10 times faster than any other onboard WiFi system (Virgin America, 2015)^[19]. Additionally, compared with Virgin America, Haier improved product quality by behaving staff and improving company morale to establish a positive brand image. Haier is the popular Chinese based company, which offers home appliances and consumer electronics with the brand image of high-quality, good customer experience, innovation and environmental protection. The employee is a driving force to produce high standard products, which helps Haier build the compelling brand image (Su, 2001)^[17].

In 1985, a customer complained that the refrigerator he bought had a scratch, therefore, with the

purpose of warning the staff to pay attention to the quality, CEO Zhang Ruimin of Haier smashed 76 refrigerators in front of his employees. After that, Haier was famous as the ‘Zero Defect’ producer (Yang, 2015)^[22]. Additionally, high company morale brings high quality product and outstanding customer service to the consumers. Haier firstly put forward employees worked as a creator instead of an executor in 2016, which suggested that every employee is motivated to use Haier as the Platform to start their own business and get connected with customers directly to improve customer experience. Secondly, compared with the traditional way of offering salary to employees, Haier chose to regard how many value that employees can bring to the consumers as the standard to increase the welfare and payment, which indeed improved the service (Fan, 2016)^[5].

5. Conclusion

As a result, the brand image is on receivers’ side and consists of various brand messages, such as brand name, service, advertisements, sponsoring, visual symbols, whereas brand identity is sent by the company to perform what they want to be recognised. Virgin America attempted to communicate with their customers through compelling safety video to stand out within the massive boring safety tips, which not only won their competitors, but also left a creative, energetic and friendly brand image in customers’ mind. On the other side, customer experience was emphasized as well, based on high-level configuration was one of the components of high-standard service. Besides, outstanding brand image of Haier was accomplished by standardising employee behaviors and improving company morale, which brought the improvement of products and service.

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