

ARTICLES

Finding Original Brand Themes: A New Way Of Looking at The Role of The Strategist

Bruce Tait

Marketers have understood the power of brands for years. Now the explicit value of the brand can be better estimated through techniques like the one Interbrand and Citigroup used to rank the value of global brands in Business- Week this past summer. This ability to measure brand value apart from more tangible assets will no doubt put more pressure on marketing departments to create brand strategies that really build stockholder value. In order to do this, brand strategists will need to find more consumer relevant and more differentiated brand positioning ideas.

It will no longer be good enough for brand managers to run a defensible process. Brand strategists will be expected to find compelling ways to raise their brands out of the swamp of sameness that characterizes brand strategy today. We will need to find truly differentiating strategies rather than relying on the same 5-6 approaches we all see all the time. For instance, does the world need another youth-targeted brand that is “irreverent, hip and streetwise”? Are there not more unique, original positioning options that appeal to the youth market?

As we’ve seen before, the truly powerful brands – the ones that deliver superior economic performance – are positioned around a relevant idea that is unique and differentiating. Brands that fall in any other quadrant of the chart are under-performers. While brands may some day appear on corporate balance sheets in America, it is important to remember that brands really exist in the minds of consumers. After all, a brand is really a collection of all the sensual and conceptual dimensions of your product, advertising, service, reputation, etc., organized into a type of narrative in consumers’ minds. In fact, if you use the right research techniques you can get consumers to tell the “story” of a good brand quite easily. A strong brand has a “character” and even a “cause” or reason for being analogous to a plot. Each new advertisement can be thought of as a chapter; sub-brands and extensions add more characters to the story.

Given the way great brands are stored in consumers’ minds, we find that the words “positioning” or “essence” inadequately describe the central idea of a brand narrative. A better term might be “theme”. That is, the brand positioning is really the theme of the brand narrative that consumers store in their minds. It is the underlying idea that a company wants to imprint in the minds of consumers about its product or service.

In a novel, the theme is the underlying message or idea that both inspires the writer and gives the novel enduring meaning to readers. Think about it. After many of the details of plot and character are forgotten, you can often remember the theme of a great book or movie. Great brands have intriguing, unique themes that consumers know and remember. For example, twentyfive years after reading The Fountainhead by Ayn Rand, I don’t remember much about the plot, but I do remember that it’s about the

SPONSORS



triumph of individualism – a pretty revolutionary thought to someone in junior high school as I was at the time.

A great plot or character portrait is never as strong without a new, but highly relevant theme. Your favorite book or movie probably presented a compelling theme that you hadn't really considered before, and it made you think and feel something new. But where do powerful themes come from?

Through history, it seems that artists and novelists have sought out themes from the dominant philosophies of their times, be it religion or a more secular philosophy. In fact, new advances in art were usually preceded by new philosophies that provided new themes. Look at The Renaissance in Europe – an intellectual and philosophical renaissance preceded the great art of that period. Brand strategists have to be these philosophers, looking for new perspectives and new ways of looking at the same old facts. Our “artists” – the product developers, designers, copywriters and art directors who bring brand strategy to life – need us to be philosophers. We need to serve them up new perspectives on humanity and new ways of looking at the same old facts with original brand themes. We may derive these new brand themes through a combination of very good research and inspiration. Others we may read about in a book or see in a different context and then bring to life in a brand theme.

If we were to think of our jobs as philosophers may be intimidating but it is also energizing. Regardless, it certainly demands that we be more original with our brand strategies. To do so, marketers will need brand models that allow for creativity in the strategic development process. Fallon Brand Consulting uses a synthesis model that requires a disciplined process of analysis but it doesn't work in a linear fashion. We need to uncover the consumer hot buttons, understand the business challenge, competitive environment, etc. and then, realistically assess the product benefits. Then it's a matter of looking for ideas that represent different emphases and different combinations of these three areas and synthesizing it into one, core brand theme.

Finding one powerful idea in the center is hard. You need to look for parallel themes in each circle and you need to find new combinations of facts. But that is the essence of creativity. As Leo Burnett once said, “The secret of all effective originality is not the creation of new words and pictures, but one of putting familiar words and pictures into new relationships.” While he was talking about advertising, this insight applies equally well to brand “philosophers” who are looking for original brand themes. And in an era where brand value will be explicitly measured, well differentiated, original brand themes will lead the way.

Bruce Tait is co-founder and Managing Partner at Fallon Brand Consulting. He can be reached at Bruce.Tait@fallon.com.
