Editorial

Romanticism and realism in brand management

An understanding of brands *in the marketplace* depends on having a realistic view of how brands are bought and of consumer attitudes to them. It also means having an holistic perspective on the subject of brands and branding. This contrasts with much that has been written about brand management — where the emphasis has been on inducing powerful value-laden thoughts or emotions through the process of myth-making by brand owners.

ROMANTICISM IN BRAND MANAGEMENT

It is commonplace to find brands discussed in terms of the value-laden thoughts or emotional responses of consumers. By the same token, more and more emphasis is being given to the creation of brands with powerful symbolic features and personalities — ‘Big Country’ Marlboro, ‘Always’ Coca-Cola, ‘cute’ Andrex, ‘wacky’ Tango, ‘sexy-sensual’ Häagen-Dazs, ‘homely’ Hovis, ‘freedom-seeking’ Harley-Davidson, ‘living memory’ Kellogg’s, ‘Irishness’ Caffrey’s etc.

These value-laden thoughts or emotions in consumers are induced by the brand imagery, by the name, packaging, colour, graphics, shape, size and structure of the product, and by the symbolic cues used in all forms of communication — from conventional advertising media, to word-of-mouth communications, direct marketing, and interactive media.

There was a time when we would have said this was a typically Continental view of brands, singularly well illustrated in the writings of Kapferer.¹ But now this emphasis is evident in academic writing more generally² and in discussions of branding in popular

media (glance at almost any issue of magazines such as *Cosmopolitan*, *Marie Claire*, *Arena* or *Elle*).

In retrospect, the drift in this direction has been evident for a number of years. The use of semiotics to decode and deconstruct brand images has shifted attention away from the tangible and self-evident aspects of brands, to the sub-surface meanings and associations. In the extreme, this gives rise to deliberately self-referential advertisements, parody in advertising, hard-to-understand advertisements, and provocative advertising — as we have come to expect from Guinness, Carling Black Label, Benetton, Levi’s and Diesel.^{3,4} The expectation is that this, in turn, gives rise to emotionally evocative brands.

Anthropologists have forced us to re-think why we purchase and why we consume. Do we wear Ray-Ban sunglasses to keep off the glare of the sun, or as a style statement — to achieve ‘the look’ as we walk along Bondi beach? Then again, why do we buy Moshino handbags and Chanel beach towels when very much cheaper items are available from Woolworths, Kmart and Wal-Mart?

Sociologists meanwhile alert us to the importance of sub-cultures and peer-groups in the processes of purchasing and consumption. Nike, with its familiar ‘Swoosh’ symbol, is a particularly recognisable example of a brand that appears to gain from peer-group approval. (This has become so evident that Nike is able to indulge in self-referential adverts in which it claims to be anti-imagery and anti-personality, an approach that is only feasible if their buyers are sufficiently ad-literate to decode the tongue-in-cheek slogans which proclaim: ‘We don’t sell dreams. We

sell shoes'). Likewise, it appears to be the case that cult brands appeal to distinct 'tribes': Harley-Davidson is for those seeking a 'freedom-of-the-road' lifestyle, whereas Ferrari is for those who see all that is beautiful in all that is Italian — part of the mythology associated with these brands is that they appeal to distinct types of buyer.

This perspective is well suited to discussions of conspicuously consumed luxury brands. In large measure, this is no more than a restatement of the traditional advertising adage that emotional claims are more effective than benefit claims in conveying advertising messages for high-involvement purchases, especially so if transformational tactics are being employed.⁵ Plenty of examples lend support to this view: Diesel, Esprit, Gucci, Kookai etc. in fashion, or Givenchy, Calvin Klein, Ellesse, Christian Dior etc. in perfumes. But we also see that this emphasis on symbolic features and brand personalities is by no means confined to luxury brands — Nike hardly falls into that category of goods.

In essence, however, this is a romantic view brands and branding. For conspicuous fashion-driven luxury items this may accurately reflect the nature of the market (although even this is open to dispute, as we shall see later). But for the bulk of brands this romantic view is based more on fanciful thinking than a systematic understanding of consumer attitudes and behaviour as played out in the marketplace.

THE PROBLEMS WITH ROMANTICISM

There are several reasons why there should be concern about current levels of romanticism in brand management:

- **Uncertain prescriptive guidance for the future** It is unclear what managers are supposed to take from studies of brand associations and the emotional connotations that they uncover. Is it a set

of prescriptions for the brands under study, or prediction in the context of brand extension studies? Desirable as these goals are, they only can be realised if brand associations generalise, and this is by no means certain. Associations are not easy to measure — to tease out from people — which raises questions about their validity, their stability over time and within individual consumers, and their variability across consumers.^{6,7} Until such issues are resolved perhaps we ought to be more circumspect about our ability to offer sound prescriptive guidance.

- **Believing the myth-making** Given the amount of advertising activity that there is, it is hardly surprising that consumers are able to play back the emotion-laden myths that they have seen in advertisements. The difficulty here is to know whether this reveals more about people's awareness and knowledge of advertisements, than their awareness and knowledge of branded products or services. Are we being given *brand* associations, or are we simply being given recollections of recent *advertising* campaigns? Indeed, are we in danger of coming to believe our own myth-making, without regard to the underlying strength of the brand in terms of its share, sales performance, price premium, and so forth?

- **Having an 'anything goes' approach to brand management** The romantic will tend to believe that anything is possible — providing there is enough vision, inspiration and creativity in the organisation — even, for instance, the brand can be made so distinctive it will appeal to an exceptionally loyal niche market. Unfortunately this can be deeply misleading, especially when the niche turns out to be merely a *small* market, and when any hope of *sustaining* a distinctive appeal is undermined by competitive pressures.⁸ These pressures

— not to mention the continual drift towards commodification — ensure that managers work within certain bounds. Anything doesn't go.

- **Ignoring the prosaic** The rhetoric of romanticism may mean that prosaic factors which more directly account for brand strength — in terms of market share, loyalty, the ability to command a price premium, and so forth — are ignored or under valued. While it may be more exciting to explore the symbolism and 'memory associations' of brands, success tends to be measured as much in terms of basic functionality, perceived quality, consistency, effective distribution etc. Buyers must be aware of the brand, have a long-run propensity to buy it, see it as value-for-money, be able to obtain it, and so forth.

Nike buyers, for instance, are able to recognise good sports shoes when they see them (despite all the perplexing symbolism — indeed, the slogan 'We don't sell dreams. We sell shoes' is not entirely tongue-in-cheek). Benetton invariably 'out-distributes' their competitors (which is one major reason for the success of this organisation). Even Porsche cars must be capable of being driven and Häagen-Dazs ice creams must be edible. In short, functional attributes of a brand continue to matter, benefit-claims of the advertising continue to matter, and the cognitive responses of consumers continue to matter — even where value-laden emotions appear to be strong.

REALISM — THE ATOMISTIC PERSPECTIVE

One response is to regard the value-laden thoughts and emotions as simply contributory factors in shaping the brand. This atomistic view sees brands as comprising distinct sets of components. The 'package' of components will include emotional re-

sponses of consumers to the symbolic personalities of brands, but not be wholly dominated by these aspects. Aaker,⁹ for instance, provides a comprehensive checklist, regarding the 'brand identity system' as product, as organisation, as person, as symbol, and these in turn feeding into the overall value proposition and brand credibility. Similar atomistic models are discussed by Macrae¹⁰ and de Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley.¹¹

However, there are problems with this approach: What are the key components, and of what relative importance are they? Does the significance of these components vary among buyers of a brand and over the lifetime of a brand? Would different brand managers give different responses? Definitive answers to these questions are hard to come by. As de Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley observe: 'while these different models simplify brand complexity into a number of parts, consensus is lacking on the brand's components and on their relative importance'.

This approach is useful — as far as it goes. But it fails to confront many of the problems listed above. It side-steps the issue of whether we can generalise, and therefore whether predictive or prescriptive inferences are possible. It continues to allow brand managers and commentators to be carried away with myth-making. It still implies an 'anything goes' approach, constrained only by limited creativity, rather than bounded by the norms of the marketplace. And prosaic factors receive short-shrift — not because they are unimportant, but because they are perceived as dull, boring, unglamorous, uncreative ... in short, prosaic.

REALISM — THE HOLISTIC PERSPECTIVE

What, then, is the alternative? To understand brands *in the marketplace* it is necessary to shift from an atomistic to a more holistic view. Recent work by Ehrenberg and his colleagues clarifies the issue.¹² Their work focuses on the

notion of *salience*. Competing brands in a market or sub-market are seen as functionally alike, but with different names, logos, packaging and so forth. There will be some limited functional differentiation even when brands are very similar (thus, Perrier is not quite the same as other major international brands like Spa, Evian or San Pelligrino, nor is it quite the same as local brands like Mount Franklin in Australia or Masafi in Dubai).

There also might be some image-like brand features which people value or at least notice some of the time ('I drink Perrier because it tastes nice'). However, such factors do not seem to make users of one brand feel much more strongly about it than users of another brand. In other words, roughly a similar proportion of Evian drinkers will say 'I drink Evian because it tastes nice' as Perrier drinkers say this of Perrier.

It is more that users of each brand have formed a preference for it and therefore perhaps identify with it. It is 'salient' for them. If Perrier sells ten times as much as Evian, it is because Perrier is salient to about ten times more people than Evian, not because Perrier consumers feel value-laden thoughts or emotions about it ten times more strongly than do Evian customers about their brand (and buy it ten times as often).

Differences in market share are seen as relating mostly to the very different numbers of consumers for whom each brand is salient — across all possible measures of awareness, liking etc. This last point is crucial. Perrier may appeal because it is associated with France (like Evian), but its buyers must also be aware of it, have a long-run propensity to buy it, see it as value-for-money, be able to obtain it, and so forth, if its market share is to be understood. Attitudinally this means that a big brand will have far more people who feel it is salient to them than a much smaller brand has — not that they feel a vastly greater degree of salience.

This viewpoint is entirely consistent with behavioural patterns, based on the notion

that individual consumers have long-run propensities to buy brands in their portfolios (their favourite, second, third etc. choices). In aggregate, big brands tend to have many more buyers than small brands — not that their buyers purchase vastly more (on average). This is closely predictable from a single parsimonious theory, the Dirichlet.¹³

This theory cautions us against being beguiled by our own myth-making and protects us from the fanciful belief that 'anything goes' in brand management. Furthermore, it forces us to consider the marketplace reasons for brand success — that buyers must be aware of the brand, have a long-run propensity to buy it, see it as value-for-money, be able to obtain it, and so forth. This is not to deny that consumers have value-laden thoughts or emotions, but to see them operating within the context of competitive product categories or sub-product categories.

WHERE DOES THIS LEAVE ROMANTICISM?

True romantics will object to this perspective in several ways:

- They will point out that much of the published realist research concentrates on low-involvement functional products (toilet tissue) and services (fast food). This is largely true, although by no means exclusively so (for instance, the car market has been studied in detail). However, the notion of salience is every bit as relevant for conspicuously consumed products or image goods — implying an holistic assessment on the part of buyers. It is also the case that within their own sub-markets these image-brands will directly compete with one another (much like brands of toothpaste, beer, toilet tissue etc. do in their markets and sub-markets) — consider sports watches from Adidas, Ellesse, and TAG Heuer, or sunglasses by Calvin Klein,

Giorgio Armani, Dolce & Gabbana, and Gaultier, or the directly competing fashion houses and perfumes listed earlier.

- It might be argued that as the brand evolves, so value-laden thoughts and emotions become more important. Earlier examples such as Nike and Häagen-Dazs would appear to bear this out. However, the opposite is just as likely — that, if anything, we would expect long-run propensities to be more entrenched for more established brands than less established ones because of brand familiarity and because of habitual/routine purchasing/use. This is not to say nothing ever changes — propensities to buy change — but infrequently. It is not as if buyers are continually re-evaluating their choices.
- Another objection is that the realist alternative denies a role for managerial creativity. However, this is not so. There is always room for creativity — within limits. Where competing brands in a market or sub-market are seen as functionally alike, they nevertheless have different names, logos, packaging and so forth. Major toothpaste brands may appear to be functionally alike, but nevertheless they come in packets, tubs or tubes, with caps or screw-tops, with bicarbonate or without. These are not major differences, and over time me-too copying gives rise to convergence, but creativity continues to be needed to fashion these brands and to communicate their properties.

A common dichotomy in the brand management literature is to distinguish 'the brand inside the firm' from 'the brand inside the consumer's mind'.^{14,15} However, there is a third perspective — 'the brand in the market' — where romance meets reality and where an holistic viewpoint is most appropriate.

Mark Uncles
Editorial Board

REFERENCES

- (1) Kapferer, J.-N. (1992) 'Strategic Brand Management', Kogan Page, London.
- (2) Aaker, D. A. (1996) 'Building Strong Brands', Free Press, New York.
- (3) Brown, S. (1995) 'Postmodern Marketing', Routledge, London.
- (4) Vezina, R. and Paul, O. (1997) 'Provocation in Advertising: A Conceptualization and an Empirical Assessment', *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, Volume 14, Number 2, pp. 177–92.
- (5) Rossiter, J. and Percy, L. (1997) 'Advertising Communications and Promotions Management', 2nd Edition, McGraw-Hill, New York.
- (6) Bottomley, P. A. and Doyle, J. R. (1996) 'The Formation of Attitudes Towards Brand Extensions: Testing and Generalising Aaker and Keller's Model', *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, Volume 13, Number 4, pp. 365–77.
- (7) Krishnan, H. S. (1996) 'Characteristics of Memory Associations: A Consumer-Based Brand Equity Perspective', *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, Volume 13, Number 4, pp. 389–405
- (8) Ehrenberg, A. S. C. and Uncles, M. D. (1997) 'Dirichlet-Type Markets', Working Paper, South Bank Business School, London and University of New South Wales, Sydney.
- (9) Aaker, D. A., op. cit.
- (10) Macrae, C. (1996) 'The Brand Chartering Handbook', Addison-Wesley, Harlow.
- (11) de Chernatony, L. de and Dall'Olmo Riley, F. (1997) 'An Assessment of the "Atomic Brand Model"', Proceedings of the Academy of Marketing Conference, Harris, P. (ed.), Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, pp. 289–300.

- (12) Ehrenberg, A. S. C., Barnard, N. B. and Scriven, J. A. (1997) 'Differentiation or Salience?', *Journal of Advertising Research*, (in press).
- (13) Ehrenberg, A. S. C. and Uncles, M. D. (1997), op. cit.
- (14) Shocker, A. D., Srivastava, R. K. and Ruekert, R. W. (1994) 'Challenges and Opportunities Facing Brand Management: An Introduction to the Special Issue', *Journal of Marketing Research*, Volume 31, Number 2, pp. 149–158.
- (15) de Chernatony, L. and Dall'Olmo Riley, F., op. cit.