The Product and the Brand

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REPRINTED FROM
HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW
MARCH-APRIL 1955

Harvard business review, March-April, 1955, 33-39.

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Basic to many of the problems of advertising and selling is the question of the consumers' attitude toward the product and particularly their conception of the brand. Qualitative research, especially of the kind which has so recently come to the fore as "consumer motivation" research, promises to add substantially to our knowledge in this area. The quantitative approach, which we used to have to rely on, only brings us part way to finding the kind of answers we need; now we can take a distinct step forward. Inquiry has taken a direct route, in the past, oriented toward finding out the number of people who use the product, the main reasons they offer for doing so, the advantages and disadvantages they find in the brand, and so forth. The users have been counted; their reasons have been listed in order of frequency (and assumed to be the most potent); and their praises and complaints have been aired and duly registered. This information is important and useful for many purposes. But it leaves a great deal untouched and hence can be misleading.

SUPERFICIAL REASONS

For one thing, the reasons people usually give for using a product are inclined to be either strongly rationalized or related to the product's most obvious purposes. Thus, most surveys tend to show that consumers want products to be, in one form or another, effective: to get clothes white, groom the hair, quench thirst, prevent tooth decay, taste good, and so on.

When such goals as these are taken at their face value, and considered to be the end of the matter, they lead up many blind alleys. The belief that people are fretting over those minute differences, presumed to provide the best quality, results in such affairs as blindfold tests that try to find an otherwise indiscernible superiority on the part of one brand over other brands, in advertisements constantly claiming "more," and sometimes in a shrill focus on product merits beyond all proportion and sensible differentiation.

STEREOTYPED CLAIMS

The consumer, who generally believes that well-known brands will quite adequately perform their intended functions, gets a glazed feeling at the scholarly astuteness required to distinguish between insistently repetitive claims. A striking example of the stereotypes into which competitive brands can fall is this list of soap and detergent themes, each from a different brand's advertisement:

- "No detergent under the sun gets clothes whiter, brighter."
- "Washes more kinds of clothes whiter and brighter."
- "Beats the sun for getting clothes whiter and brighter."
- "Washes clothes whiter without a bleach."
- "Gives you a whiter wash without bleaching than any other 'no rinse' suds with bleach added."
- "Alone gets clothes whiter than bleach."

Presumably little else can be done if the advertisers have the fixed idea that housewives are preoccupied solely with the whiteness of their laundry--because that is the most frequent,

conscious, immediate notion women can muster up to explain their use of detergents and to justify the use of any preferred brand. But surely there is more to the matter than that.

What are some of the more fundamental issues a manufacturer and his advertising people should face in getting beyond such apparent aims, and what can they do about them?

NEW INSIGHTS

Answering this question calls for a greater awareness of the social and psychological nature of "products"--whether brands, media, companies, institutional figures, services, industries, or ideas. New conceptions and orientations are needed for a sensible understanding of the communication process that goes on in offering an object to the public.

COMPLEX MOTIVES

Many current ideas about human psychology are overly simple and nonoperational in definition. Gross assumptions are made about what people want and what motivates their wanting. Quick generalizations are made and arbitrarily transferred from one situation to another, often inappropriately.

For example, two very common motives that are belabored (when specific product substances and effects are not made the main issue) are (a) the striving to be economical and (b) the desire to emulate people of higher status. Undoubtedly consumers do pursue bargains and many people do have social aspirations. In given instances these ideas may have to be given crucial consideration. Nevertheless, there is a tremendous range of other variables that may totally negate, or even reverse, the direction of these strivings--and the complications in any single situation should be specifically studied.

Thus, as far as economy is concerned, with many kinds of products low cost is not intently sought, or there may be a subtle assessment of "good value" being made. Indeed, consumers may have a definite figure in mind (arrived at in some curious way) which they believe is the price the object should cost. Hence elasticity of demand can vary in strange patterns.

Again, with the mobility of our society, millions of Americans do want to make progress, but not necessarily "upward." They simply may not want to be like, or to live like, people of a different social status. While sometimes a "woman's point of view" may prevail in management councils, and the manufacturer's wife may then be a good source of information, all too often lower middle-class and upper lower-class housewives (the most of the housewives) do not think like Mrs. Management, do not share many of her needs, her values, her esthetics, or her ways of solving problems.

Thus, one of the first things a manufacturer and his advertising people need to explore is the particular constellation of goals and attitudes most pertinent to their product and brand situation, rather than applying blindly the one that seemed so useful to Listerine 15 years ago, to Ford last year, or to Kraft this year.

PRODUCT DIMENSIONS

Such explorations must take into account the character of the product (the human needs it serves and the particular way it does so), the dimensions employed in evaluating brands of such a product, and where the particular brand stands on these dimensions. At the literal level, a

newspaper, for example, is supposed to be "a printed publication issued at regular intervals, usually daily or weekly, and commonly containing news, comment, features, and advertisements" (according to the American College Dictionary). These are common expectations, and a newspaper will be measured as to how well or poorly it is printed, how regularly it appears, whether it distinguishes its news, comments, features, ads, and so on.

However, in our society other dimensions will emerge, perhaps of greater importance, to differentiate the papers in influential ways. The definition does not show (as qualitative research does) that the public tends to feel that a sense of public responsibility is a major ingredient in the character of a newspaper; and this factor will be very important to the image of any given paper, in itself and in how it compares with its competitors.

Furthermore, anyone can readily observe that different papers generally have what we can call different personalities. Thus, The New York Times is quite a different thing from the New York Daily News, or the Chicago Tribune is different from the Chicago Sun-Times. These differences appear in many ways: selection of news, handling of particular stories, choice of headlines, types of facts reported, and editorial content. Thus they represent complex systems of values and of judgments, applied to the daily process of getting out a paper.

PUBLIC IMAGE

In similar fashion, a brand name is more than the label employed to differentiate among the manufacturers of a product. It is a complex symbol that represents a variety of ideas and attributes. It tells the consumers many things, not only by the way it sounds (and its literal meaning if it has one) but, more important, via the body of associations it has built up and acquired as a public object over a period of time. A well-chosen brand name may have a rhythmic quality (like Jell-O for desserts) or an apt air (like Bell for telephones). It will also convey meanings which advertising, merchandising, promotion, publicity, and even sheer length of existence have created.

The net result is a public image, a character or personality that may be more important for the over-all status (and sales) of the brand than many technical facts about the product. Conceiving of a brand in this way calls for a rethinking of brand advertising, and of the kinds of judgments that have to be made by an informed management about its communications to the public. CRUCIAL SYMBOLS

The image of a product associated with the brand may be clear-cut or relatively vague; it may be varied or simple; it may be intense or innocuous. Sometimes the notions people have about a brand do not even seem very sensible or relevant to those who know what the product is "really" like. But they all contribute to the customer's deciding whether or not the brand is the one "for me."

These sets of ideas, feelings, and attitudes that consumers have about brands are crucial to them in picking and sticking to ones that seem most appropriate. How else can they decide whether to smoke Camels or Marlboro; to use Nescafe or Maxim's instant coffee; to drive a Ford or a Chevrolet or a Plymouth.

Justifying choice is easier with the cars; there at least the products have clearly visible differences. But the reasons people give for choosing a brand of cigarettes (and soap and bread and laxatives) are pretty much the same. Thus you find drinkers of any brand of beer justifying their preference in identical terms: "Millers is better because it's dry." "I like a dry beer, so I prefer Bud to Millers."

Something must make a greater difference; the conceptions of the different brands must be compounded of subtle variations in feelings about them, not necessarily in product qualities. A big problem in this area, then, is what kind of symbol a given brand is to consumers.

RESEARCH IN DEPTH

A variety of concepts and methods are being applied to this type of problem. Procedures first developed to explore the complex facets of attitudes and motives in clinical and academic research are finding new adaptations. They are especially useful for arriving at an understanding of the attitudes and feelings which make up the image of a product and a brand.

UNCOVERING ATTITUDES

Rather than interviewing a large number of respondents in a terse, question-and-answer fashion, researchers take smaller samples and interview them at some length. The subjects are allowed to express themselves with a relatively large degree of individuality, to give their views in their own words. Hence, the interview usually proceeds in a conversational fashion rather than being held to a tightly circumscribed framework. In addition, various kinds of more or less vague and ambiguous stimuli are introduced into the interview. They present an issue or a task that the respondent must handle in his or her own way, thereby "projecting" assumptions and evaluations that might not otherwise be made explicit. An example of one of these projective techniques is thematic analysis of storytelling.

Interviewees are shown a picture that makes some reference to use of the product or a particular brand. Although respondents might not be willing to say, for instance, that they are relatively indifferent to the object, it may be apparent from their stories. Perhaps the stories are unusually brief, limited in variety of ideas, lacking in liveliness, or extremely repetitive. By contrast, another object being studied might elicit stories expressed enthusiastically and with a good deal of individuality of associations and experiences.

DISCERNING DIFFERENCES

Where the various brands of a product are largely indistinguishable as to quality, cost, effectiveness, and so on--or, what is about the same thing, each user group claims that its brand is outstanding on the same points--how can the consumers' varying brand evaluations be discerned? Sometimes matching techniques show public views that consumers have difficulty in stating--or that they even deny. When consumers are presented with a list of kinds of people and asked to name those most likely to choose each of the brands, many resist the task as meaningless, since presumably all the brands are basically comparable. Nevertheless, random patterns of these evaluations rarely emerge, as would be expected if consumers' responses were taken at their face value. Instead, definite dimensions do show up. In other words, consumers really believe there are differences among the brands. To illustrate:

On one device, Brand A may turn out to be regarded as the most suitable for wives of doctors, lawyers, office managers, and company presidents, while Brand B is attributed to the wives of electricians, carpenters, taxi drivers, and grocery clerks. Clearly, there is a social status

differentiation between the two brands that helps a woman determine which is more suited for her own needs. (Remember, it does not mean that Brand B will be rejected, either; many consumers do not want to emulate members of other social groups.) It may also turn out that on another device Brand A is named as especially used by home economists, stepmothers, professional women, and movie actresses, while Brand B is regarded as suitable for motherly women, beginning housewives, practical cooks, and old-fashioned cooks. The image of Brand A is more austere, less friendly; the consumers see it not only as of higher status but also somewhat remote. On the other hand, Brand B has a warmer sound to it, a down-to-earth quality; it is regarded as a more ordinary brand, one for everyday people.

By the use of such approaches, including incomplete sentences, word association, forced choices, and role playing, the main dimensions of a brand or product character can be drawn out. The important ideas may not be mysterious, or even profound psychological constructions; they are more likely to be similar in quality to the way human personalities show themselves. The techniques used are not the crux of the matter; they are only avenues to understanding. The emphasis in such research must necessarily be given to skill in interpretation and to reaching a coherent picture of the brand. The researchers must allow their respondents sufficient self-expression so that the data are rich in complex evaluations of the brand. In this way, the consumers' thoughts and feelings are given precedence rather than the preconceptions of the researchers, although these are present too in hypotheses and questions.

MANAGEMENT'S TASK

the same way other people do.

After having discovered how the product and brand are organized in consumers' minds, management's problem is what to do about it.

Setting Goals

First of all, management must take into account these two basic points:

- (1) A reputable brand persists as a stable image through time. The ideas people have about it are not completely malleable, not idly swayed by one communication and then another. If the public believes that a certain brand is of inferior quality or that another is "on the skids," or that some other has all the latest improvements, these beliefs are not usually modified very rapidly. Such reputations are built through time, frequently in ways that management is not aware of.

 (2) It is rarely possible for a product or brand to be all things to all people. It may be most desirable to sell to the most people, but hardly anyone can sell to everyone. Some brands have very skillfully built up reputations of being suitable for a wide variety of people, but in most areas audience groupings will differ, if only because there are deviants who refuse to consume
- More significantly, there are different age, sex, social class, personality groupings, to say nothing of special interest groups, ethnic groups, and occupational groups. It is not easy for a brand to appeal to stable lower middle-class people and at the same time to be interesting to sophisticated, intellectual upper middle-class buyers.

Accordingly, management has to determine what kind of brand it wants to present. Does it wish to be very dignified (and forego the teen-age, dime-store customers); does it want to be smart and individual (and latch onto The New Yorker readers); or does it want to seem a bit daring and frivolous (and skip a lot of moral middle-class housewives)?

Decision Making

Basically, although advertising and research people can contribute a great deal toward making the judgment most realistic, this is a management decision. A great deal can stand or fall on the direction taken--such as whether the company stakes its success on winning a larger part of a smaller market, or moving more goods at a lower margin, or whatever the long-range strategy may be.

Knowingly or not, management makes this decision. Thus, some companies do it by refusing to sponsor certain radio or television shows because they believe they are undignified, and (by making these and other such decisions) may wind up in the public eye as a rather stuffy outfit with a too-expensive product. Other managements insist on "hard sell," until they discover to their dismay that their market has become predominantly lower class.

Deciding about each campaign or action may not require a session on the razor's edge, but the most fruitful approach is one that involves an awareness of long-range goals for the character of the product as well as some attempt to be consistent with the chosen course.

Preparing for Action

It is not enough for management to say to itself, "Of course we want a favorable brand image. So having decided we want one that will appeal to all groups, that will have all good qualities and no negative ones, let's tell the world this is what we are." The management that takes this approach to developing an effective brand image is no more likely to succeed than the management that tries to convince its employees it is benevolent and only concerned with their good by merely telling them loud and often about its benevolent intentions.

For management to be able to handle this problem effectively it should evaluate its brand's current public image, the differences seen by different important consumer groups, and the images of competitive brands. Otherwise, it does not know just what it is working against, what limitations in image must be overcome, and what strengths it has to build on.

Basic attitudes toward products may set limits on the kind of image that might be developed or in the kinds of satisfactions that the product image may imply. Or a given brand may have such a strong image in some respects that it is more feasible to accept these than to change them. For example, if a product has a strong image of high quality and special-occasion use, it might be disastrous to try to reduce it rapidly to more prosaic everyday use.

By knowing the possible directions in which it might go, management is in a position to judge the specific moves or campaigns designed to reach the goals it has set.

THE AGENCY'S ROLE

Once the current public view of a brand has been explored and an image to be aimed at for the future has been determined, the major problems are assumed by the company's advertising agency. It is the business of advertising to assist in the creation of brand images, to give them structure and content, to develop a pattern of consumer attitudes likely to lead to brand purchase. How can the advertising agency go about this; what is its role?

Professional Standards

As a profession, advertising has many possible roles: should it be creative, businesslike, or sociable; should it nursemaid the client (and maybe his family) or strike out for independence and professional integrity. Advertising has been subject to pressures from the whims and

presumed knowledge of its clients in a way that well-established professions refuse to tolerateand for several reasons:

- Advertising has been an occupation of creativity and individual personalities.
- The effects of advertising campaigns are often difficult to measure.
- Single accounts can mean life or death to an agency.
- Everyone believes he knows what an advertisement should be like.

However, as advertising builds up a body of principles, an increased understanding of audience composition and reactions, and a wide-ranging familiarity with procedures and techniques--plus a sense of responsibility and pride in good performance--management should recognize these developments and take advantage of them.

Having set the goals for its product, management ideally should leave to the skills and know-how of the advertising people the job of implementing them. A layman (with reference to any profession) is frequently not in a position to understand how a particular process or step-- or advertising layout--is conducive to the desired goals.

Building the Brand

In creating, developing, or modifying a brand image, the advertising people must have a good understanding of the situation that confronts them. This includes a nuanced appreciation of the brand image as it already exists--with an awareness that the momentary sales position of the brand may be less important for its future than the danger that people may think of it as getting increasingly passé, perhaps.

Advertising men must think about such problems as:

- 1. In a lively product area, is the brand thought of as dull?
- 2. In a conservative product area, is the brand too frivolously presented?
- 3. Does it involve anxious connotations?
- 4. Does its use pattern seem increasingly circumscribed?
- 5. Is it an "unfriendly" brand, an overly masculine brand, a weak-seeming brand, and so on? Understanding the brand problems and the manufacturer's goals (and remember that his objective is not always just to sell the most goods the quickest) is a basic requirement. Then a thorough knowledge of how to move ahead is needed. What are the kinds of variables that have to be dealt with? How can they be got across to the public?

The truly sophisticated advertising man realizes that communications are subtle, that many an advertisement says things about the product that were never intended by the copywriter. To illustrate: Some time ago a less sophisticated advertising man wanted to know why it was that instant coffee had come to be regarded as an inferior substitute when it was originally thought of as an expensive concentrate. It did not occur to him that his own agency had for a long time been instrumental in offering a brand of instant coffee with constant emphasis on savings, bargains, deals, economies.

Brand images do not grow in a vacuum. A newspaper advertisement that employed a heavy black border to demarcate it from its neighbors was noted by consumers as dead-looking, and the product was thought impure. An advertisement that showed the fine texture of the product under a microscope made people think of disease bacteria.

Long-Term Investment

In themselves, such instances of individual advertisements may not be crucial; certainly a product image is the result of many varied experiences. They all make their contributions, for

good or for bad, and will do so best when the long-range goals are kept in mind during their creation. Too many advertisements are built as individual units, with a conglomeration of elements to satisfy different agency and client tastes rather than with reference to a guiding, governing product and brand personality that is unified and coherently meaningful.

In many advertising conferences someone will ask: "Which of these campaigns will sell the most packages?" This is not an irrelevant question, certainly, since presumably advertising that does not sell is unproductive. Nevertheless, a single campaign is not the manufacturer's only salesman, and he usually intends to remain in business for many following years. From this point of view it is more profitable to think of an advertisement as a contribution to the complex symbol which is the brand image --as part of the long-term investment in the reputation of the brand.

This point of view has many implications. It means that:

- Copy should be thought about in terms of its symbolic and indirect meanings as well as its literal communication.
- Color and illustration are not merely esthetic problems since they also have social and psychological implications.
- Media selection should be related to a brand image plan and not merely geared to circulation figures.
- Research should seek out ideas and meanings as well as audience statistics.

CONCLUSION

We have sought to highlight some ideas that seem to be important in the thoughtful presentation of products and brands. Products and brands have interwoven sets of characteristics and are complexly evaluated by consumers. Hence, advertising a product is not a matter of isolated messages. It calls for analyses of attitudes and motives. It also calls for a differentiated knowledge and judgment on the part of management and advertising people; in a sense, their tasks become richer, and the division of responsibility more meaningful.

With the findings of qualitative research, management can see its product in a clearer perspective. Advertising people can increase their awareness of the social-scientific nature of the communication process and the way in which their actions influence it. Those on the creative side of advertising, particularly, can find new sources of stimulation and inspiration in breaking away from the preconceptions and conventions that have fixed so much advertising in set molds.