

MARKET RESEARCH

Quality Branding



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Wherein lies the value of a brand? Words have meaning, so let's illustrate with a word game. Here's one of my favorites—pastoral. I like it because we can read so much into it—for me it connotes quiet, idyllic country scenery, soft rolling fields under the mountains, grazing livestock, trout streams, puffy clouds on a midsummer day...you get the idea. The image of Beethoven's 6th symphony may not stir my soul, but that of his "Pastorale" symphony does. Words like pastoral function as positive, image-rich words onto which people can project their own wants and preferences.

Other words connote negative imagery. I would probably advise against branding any product a "black hole," for example, a term the marketing community uses to describe marketing campaigns that suck-in huge resources while emitting no discernable benefit. Marketing history is replete with image-rich gaffs, such as General Motors' marketing of the Chevrolet Nova (i.e., "doesn't work" in Spanish) in Latin America. In short, words matter.

Decision Criteria

Think of a brand as a company and a product as an abstract. Have you ever found yourself in a situation whereby you waste enormous amounts of time trying to parse the benefits provided between competing products (e.g., automobiles)? In a complex, time-compressed world, brands help consumers simplify their decision making.

People mentally organize their purchase decision criteria into hierarchies when making daily food transactions—which type of coffee to buy, what price to pay for bananas, which pasta offers the perfect al dente texture, or what brand of bread offers the best flavor? Many of these criteria are positive, others are negative. Is the product safe? What are the odds that it will disappoint?

Will it Disappoint?

A Heinz quality control executive once recounted to me the story of the company's founding. It appears that in the mid-nineteenth century, horseradish condiment was sold in amber bottles to hide the many fillers, some dangerous, commonly used as adulterants. John H. Heinz hit upon the idea of selling his horseradish in clear glass bottles so that consumers could confirm its purity. He used his brand to flip a category's negative image to accentuate his own product's positive image.

Brands can work for you or against you. It is easy, especially for eternally optimistic marketers and product developers (like me), to focus on a product's positive benefits. It is less enjoyable to focus on the potential negatives. Brands contain both and consumers continually weigh the negatives against the positives. Yet, not all negatives and positives are equal. An occasional off flavor may be forgivable, but a product safety failure, never! It is against this that quality control professionals present our last line of defense.

Reflect, if you will, on the imagery and word associations that come to mind with the following brands—McDonalds, Beechnut, Lexus, Sony, made in Japan...made in China?

I confess a certain fondness for the McDonalds brand—for me, it implies rich flavors, consistency, reliability, safety, cleanliness, sensitivity to nutrition, and clean bathroom stops when I travel. So, the very rare bit of bone in my sausage, egg shell in my Egg McMuffin, subpar store, or calorie count is entirely forgivable. It can even be a mark of authenticity (remember, brands are Rorschach blots). For me, anyway, McDonald's brand equity shines.

Contrast that to the taco I once ordered at a local mall outlet in Denver 20-plus years ago. My first bite filled my senses with... the waitress's fingernail polish thinner. Or, the vividly remembered fast food sandwich shop in which the customer standing beside me complained about the bandage he found in his sandwich. I can tell you where and when these incidents happened and that I never shopped those brands again. Such disappointments leave brands irredeemably spoiled.

Brand despoilment doesn't have to involve anything as overtly serious as safety: observe the frantic backpedaling that occurred when consumers discovered that a manufacturer had switched recipes on their leading brand, as recently happened to a Chicago baker.

The Information Age

Our business environment today is far less forgiving of disappointments than ever before. One theory for Hollywood's demise is that a poor-quality movie could at one time depend on many viewings to at least guarantee a minimum revenue before the film's negative ratings caught up. Marketers could once rely on the simple formula that each positive consumer evaluation of a new product would be conveyed to two or three others by word of mouth, whereas any negative evaluation would be spread to ten. In today's age of the Internet and text messaging, however, we can probably multiply these assumptions by factors of 10 or more. Positive and negative consumer reactions are forever cataloged on the Internet. Likewise, consumer reactions to products, positive and negative, are virtually instantaneous.

By now the rising stature of QA and QC personnel within the corporate hierarchy should be clear. I recall an in-company training session twenty-or-so years ago whereby our work group was given the task of designing control systems to catch off-quality products before they left the dock. During our convoluted dis-

cussions, one young, nontechnical lady blurted out, “but wouldn’t we be better off figuring out why quality problems occur rather than how to catch them after the fact?” Conversation stopped.

She had put her finger on the quality ethos. Companies today can rely upon “hitchhiker” brands to convey their quality credentials. At the business-to-business level, companies can get certified through AIB International, FPA-Safe, or the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) to document their adherence to a specified quality standard. Consumer manufacturers tag on their own quality- or value-connoting brands: kosher, free trade, organic, etc. It isn’t enough. Such brands provide the talk and show the walk, but they do not substitute for a company-permeating quality ethos. What truly matters is what happens once the inspectors leave.

Like John H. Heinz in 1869, that young lady was absolutely right; she had intuited her W. Edwards Deming. This is why quality should never be an afterthought, but rather a forethought burned into the company ethos. And that’s how companies ultimately earn their “quality” brand.

Daniel Best is president and founder of Best Vantage Inc., a food technology-focused marketing and business development company based in Northbrook, IL. His eclectic career path includes working as a food scientist (Rustco Wholesale Bakery Products and General Mills, Inc.), executive director of the Dairy Research Foundation (now merged into Dairy Management Inc.), technical director for a leading food industry trade publication (*Prepared Foods*), and numerous entrepreneurial ventures. He earned an undergraduate degree in biochemistry and psychology from the University of Wisconsin–Madison, an M.S. degree from Colorado State University, and an M.B.A. through the University of St. Thomas (St. Paul, MN). He served as editor of *CEREAL FOODS WORLD* between 2006 and 2007 and remains active in numerous professional organizations, including AACC International. He can be reached at dbest@bestvantageinc.com.

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