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A history of the concept of branding: practice and theory

A history of branding

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Abstract

Purpose – This inquiry aims to contribute to the literature on the historical developments that have influenced the origin, uses, and meanings of branding.

Design/methodology/approach – In this qualitative work an historical methodology was followed and, according to Howell and Prevenier's guidelines, a wide variety of sources were selected of the data presented. Moreover, this study draws on three important perspectives – that of the practitioner, the scholar, and the consumer – in order to offer a thorough view of the relevant issues concerning the evolution of branding.

Findings – The investigation suggests that various forces (e.g., the media, economic developments during the Second World War, marketing research and theorizing) have enacted a comprehensive transformation in the concept of branding. First, the paper offers evidence of the link between fire/burning and the origin of branding. Second, it shows that, in its early days, branding was characterized as a phenomenon with limited applicability. Third, the paper demonstrates how that phenomenon was transformed into a multidimensional, multifunctional, and malleable entity. Last, it presents recent evidence from both business and academia that shows the current, complex status of the concept of branding.

Originality/value – The paper is novel in its large perspective and integrative narrative, and the unusual exposure of its various conceptual issues and links. It should be of interest to marketing historians, brand managers, and scholars of branding.

Keywords Branding history, Evolution, Brand image, Brand research, Brand management

Paper type General review

Introduction

Cassio: Reputation, reputation, reputation! O, I have lost my reputation! I have lost the immortal part of myself, and what remains is bestial. My reputation, Iago, my reputation! (Shakespeare, *Othello*, Iliiii).

Despite the central role branding plays in marketing (Price, 2010), major academic marketing activity and thought have neglected the branding phenomenon and the way it entered the discourse of marketing theory and research. This paper is an essay on the evolution of branding. A general theme present in this investigation is the evolution of the brand from a simple entity with limited application and whose creation, interpretation, and control are mostly enacted by one actor (i.e. its creator), to the brand as a complex entity that is multi-dimensional and multi-functional, and that receives influences from a variety of actors (e.g. the brand manager, the consumer, the media, the marketing researcher, technology).

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The principal aims of this research are to:

- explain the origins of branding;
- investigate the forces behind its evolution and examine its core meanings throughout time; and
- discuss its current and future significance to both business and research.

To those ends, we use an historical methodology accounting for the changes in branding over time, the contexts in which those changes occurred, the forces driving them, and the consequences that followed. Given the importance of high-quality data sources in historical research, we follow Howell and Prevenier's (2001) guidelines in the selection of sources of data that we present in this work. Specifically, Howell and Prevenier (2001, p. 79) establish that historical researchers should consider whether "the source was intentionally or unintentionally created; whether it presents data of a social bookkeeping kind that have a certain reliability because they report patterns of social action;" and whether there exists a variety of high-quality sources of data that converge on the focal arguments.

In accordance with the above guidelines, we present historical arguments supported by data derived from books, advertisements, newspapers (e.g. *The Wall Street Journal*), the internet (e.g. the American Historical Association web site), classical literature, institutional reports (e.g. Nielsen Corporation), course syllabus (from 1930), mythological accounts, the arts (e.g. the play *Euripides*, the novel *The Scarlet Letter*), and published and unpublished scientific works. In selecting this wide pool of sources, we had in mind Witkowski and Jones' (2006, p. 76) assertion that, in historical research, "collecting different sources, both within and across categories, is highly desirable." It is worth mentioning that this array of data sources often enabled us to replicate our findings and, consequently, to continually check the credibility and accuracy of our interpretations (Low and Fullerton, 1994).

Our analysis and interpretation of the data follow an approach that, in Fullerton's (1988, p. 109) words, is a "process of synthesis through which the researcher interprets the evidence to provide a coherent re-creation of what actually happened in the past." In reporting our interpretation of those events, we adopt a creative and critical tone. We report our analysis using traditional historical narrative in which linkages are made both chronologically and topically. That is, we follow a temporal sequence of events and use the major occurrences as the turning points. Witkowski and Jones (2006, p. 77) call this approach "context-driven periodization" and explain it as one "where the chronology is punctuated by the occurrence of some external event or events."

Notably, most of the historical evolution of branding discussed herein comes from three perspectives – that of the practitioner, the scholar, and the consumer. While, as we show, these three groups of actors have played key roles in the evolution of branding, it is surprising that most of the existing research on brands has "focused almost exclusively on the consumer side of the equation in order to determine what makes an effective brand from the perspective of the consumer" (Moore and Reid, 2008, p. 420).

Thus, the present paper aims at adding to our knowledge on branding's historical developments and on the principal forces behind those developments by using a multi-perspective approach. By doing so, it intends to extend works such as Moore and Reid (2008), Mercer (2010), and Schwarzkopf (2009).

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: First, we discuss the interplay between sign and symbol to illustrate the meanings embedded in the concept of branding. Second, we explain how burning was an essential factor in the origin of branding. Third, we explore the early phases and the significant events that led to the development of modern branding, and the role that the concept of brand image played in that process. Fourth, we show how branding's advanced state now translates into its broad applicability in both research and business. Next, we discuss how branding has become a tool that equips the brand manager with flexibility, excitement, magic, and elegance. Last, we outline three topics that will likely prove influential in the future of branding.

The brand is both a sign and a symbol

At the root of all branding activity is the human desire to be someone of consequence, to create a personal and social identity, to present oneself as both like other people (e.g. to belong) and unlike other people (e.g. to stand out), and to have a good reputation. Sign and symbol are essential ingredients of this branding phenomenon. As a form of marking, branding is richly ramified by application to oneself, to other people, and to property; it takes both material and metaphorical forms; and is perceived either positively or negatively.

Although the common understanding of branding as the naming of a product is essentially a simple one, the applications of this idea and the thinking about it have evolved in dramatic ways. To appreciate that evolution requires awareness of the difference between a sign and a symbol. Jung (1964, p. 20) refers to "familiar trademarks, names of . . . badges, or insignia," saying, "Such things are not symbols. They are signs and they do no more than denote the objects to which they are attached. What we call a symbol is a term, a name, or even a picture that may be familiar in daily life, yet that possesses specific connotations in addition to the conventional and obvious meaning." In a similar vein, Mercer (2010, p. 18) explains that a trademark (i.e. a sign) "is the tangible item of intellectual property – the logo, name, design, or image – on which the brand rests. But brands also incorporate intangibles such as identity, associations, and personality."

Branding starts as a sign, a way of denoting that an object is what it is and then becomes a form of naming something (e.g. a steer, a slave, a prisoner, a detergent). But immediately, denotation is not enough and connotations arise. Being named an animal, a slave, a prisoner, or a product are not merely denotative terms; they also imply other ideas. The brand on an animal or a person promptly becomes a symbol of ownership and reputation. Branding is usually done by using some kind of mark placed either directly on the object or indirectly on a label (e.g. a slip, a flap, a patch) that is affixed to the object. In addition to signifying ownership and the status of the one branded, a mark might be a positive sign of distinction. It is important to note the interweaving of the positive and negative meanings of branding that will be shown in this essay.

Marking as stigma

Marking has a long, familiar history and widespread connotation of inferiority and stigma. This negative view endures, often finding overt expression or existing as an undercurrent to social views of branding when it is criticized as baleful, insidious, and manipulative. The brander is often regarded as superior to the branded. For example,

marked animals and slaves are dominated by their owners. Prisoners are depersonalized by being identified with numbers. Servants are standardized and attributed the conforming meanings of their position by being dressed in uniforms. A classic instance of the use of a mark to convey social disapproval is depicted in the novel, *The Scarlet Letter*, in which Hester is required to wear an A for adultery. Similarly, the mark that the Bible says God placed on Cain is often interpreted as his being cursed for killing his brother, Abel. The curse detached Cain from farming the land and made him an outcast, an exile, a wanderer. On the positive side, however, when Cain protests that God's mark will get him killed, God says it will protect him by serving as a warning. The use of signs to warn off predators is in fact a common form of security. Rook (1987), for instance, discusses hex signs (i.e. violators will be cursed) and the modern practice of placing markers on property to label it as under protection.

Another example of negative branding is shown in Euripides' play, *Phaedra* (c. 428 BCE). Hippolytus, the young man, is sent away by his father. The son laments being "Lashed out of Athens, an exile" (in Moore's (1998) modern translation). In an earlier and much admired translation, Murray (1904a) sees not a lash but a brand:

Lo, I am driven with a caitiff's brand
Forth from great Athens!

Murray's (1904a) use of the word brand may actually be more appropriate than Moore's (1998) use of the word lash. The former uses "caitiff's brand" in the metaphorical sense of being designated a bad person. Like Cain, Hippolytus is being branded by being driven into exile. In modern times cultural groups have also been branded as undesirable. The Nazis marked Jews with depersonalizing numbers; more recently the French stigmatized Gypsies by driving them out of France. The sailor, as a kind of wanderer with "a girl in every port", was frequently tattooed, marking him as footloose, sexy, and promiscuous.

Marking of the skin

To understand the deep roots of the purposes and meanings of branding, as well as its notably positive aspects, we observe that marking the skin has a long history of serving various cosmetic, medicinal, social, psychological, political, and cultural purposes. Both men and women have used a variety of substances to enhance their appearances. For example, "A dark-colored powder made of crushed antimony, burnt almonds, lead, oxidized copper, ochre, ash, malachite and chrysocolla" called kohl was especially popular for coloring around the eyes in ancient Egypt and other societies (4VOO, 2010). Tattooing, which comes from the Polynesian *tatau*, is used in Borneo to signify rites of passage, and changes from one status to another – e.g. coming of age or becoming a father. Variations of such activities are found among African tribes in the form of elongation of the neck and enlarging the ears and the lips.

In summary, the foregoing discussion aims at enlarging our comprehension of the origins of the many meanings embedded in the concept of branding. These meanings can be negative and positive; they can also have major consequences; they involve branding others and branding oneself; they have strong roots in human motives for power, conquest, and domination as well as in many other forms of self-expression that are practical, social, and aesthetic. Next, we advance a discussion on the origin of the term "brand" and on brand's incorporation of meanings from its originator (i.e. fire, burning).

Burning is the core nature of branding

The question arises: why is this marking called branding? To begin our explanation, we will draw on another example of Murray's (1904b) use of "brand". Specifically, we consider his translation of Euripides' play, *The Bacchae*. Murray refers to Dionysus's mother as "the brand" and as "Lightning's Bride" because she was struck by a lightning bolt from Zeus to acknowledge that he had impregnated her and caused the birth of Dionysus. Another translation says simply that she gave birth due to the "lightning-bearing fire." That is, "firing up" is a metaphor for giving life. The myth of Prometheus stealing fire from the gods illustrates how important a gift it was to mankind.

Centuries ago, the practical aspect of identifying ownership was mainly its application to animals and slaves. In 2700 BCE the Egyptians branded oxen with hieroglyphics. Likewise, the ancient Greeks and Romans marked livestock and slaves. Basic to the aggressive act of marking animals and slaves was the use of fire. A flaming sword symbolized the power of God and the protection of the gates of heaven. Another evidence of the link between burning and brand are the German expressions *es brennte* (it is burning) and *der Brand* (the fire, the burning). Moreover, root definitions of the words brand and branding include such elements as a flaming torch and a hot iron. Echoing these views, Moore and Reid (2008) write that evidence for the link between burning and branding is found in the Icelandic synonyms' "oom" and "brond", which mean "burning" or "fire."

The literal idea of branding as a form of burning is an especially powerful one. Interestingly, the Swiss psychoanalyst, Pfister (1915) raised the question, "*Ist die Brandstiftung ein archaischer Sublimierungsversuch?*" ("Is Arson an Archaic Attempt at Sublimation?"). Sublimation implies a positive function, a channeling of libidinous or aggressive energies into constructive purposes, unlike arson which is a misbegotten version. But Pfister's question is an important one as it points to the role of passionate motivation that gives branding its powerful significance in people's everyday lives. Worthy of note is an early paper by Levy (1948) titled *Fire!* in which he writes:

The normal individual derives pleasure in watching fire due to sexual and cutaneous satisfactions. In those deviate persons who find that setting fires in reality or fantasy is necessary as an outlet for their impulsivity or gratification. . .relationships are found with aggression, attention-getting behavior, insecurity feelings, anxiety, homosexuality, an unresolved oedipal conflict, and urethral-erotic fixation (Levy, 1948, p. 7).

Traditionally, unacceptable figures were denounced and burned at the stake –*auto-da-fé* – and effigies are burned in modern rituals, as with Burning Man (Kozinets and Sherry, 2004) and the Danish Sankt Hans at Midsummer's Night.

At the same time, fire is warm and comforting, it cooks food and gives life, it lights the way and characterizes people who care strongly about their ideas and feelings. The firebrand is a piece of burning wood, and is also an agitator – someone who creates unrest or strife as in aggressively promoting a cause. A version in the Koran that refers to firebrand reads, "When Musa (Moses) said to his family: Surely I see fire; I will bring to you from it some news, or I will bring to you therefrom a burning firebrand so that you may warm yourselves." From the fire, he brings information and comfort.

In everyday life, an object may be new for a while, but before that it is popularly said to be brand new, or as one may say, it is "hot off the griddle" or "hot off the presses". It is as if it were still quivering with the heat and excitement of its creation and freshness of information. Many expressions also use fire and burning to

communicate character and force. When we are inspired we are fired up, we have a fiery temper, we may be aflame or burn with desire and passion, we are burned by bad experiences, we are fired from a job, and we fire away with questions.

As derived from burning, branding carries the large potential for searing, singeing, scarring, being stimulating, arousing, compelling, fascinating, overpowering, aversive, and, ultimately, destroying or consuming. The strength of branding is reflected in the assertiveness of the word “brandish” which means:

- to wave or flourish (e.g. a weapon) menacingly; and
- to display ostentatiously.

Thus it is that marketers proudly flaunt their names and logos and other means of creating their brands and consumers wear shirts with Izod alligators pictured on them or carry expensive Gucci purses with the letters GG emblazoned on them.

In sum, the core idea of branding coming from fire carries intensity of meaning. It generates feelings of partisanship and opposition, of power and excitement. Because it announces identity and has the potential for beauty, devotion, and distinction, it draws conformity or arouses criticism and resistance against its domination.

The early days of modern branding

The major developments influencing modern branding derived from two fronts – theorizing and research, and its role in business. This section investigates the more recent evolution of brands, taking account of:

- the early disregard, especially among academics, to the branding phenomenon; and
- relevant contributions made by business actors.

Branding – theory and research

In this section, various examples are presented to demonstrate the scenario of relative neglect and narrow views that, until recently, characterized branding in the academic arena.

Early writings about marketing are described in a delightful account by Shaw (1995) in his presentation of *Lessons from the Past: Early Marketing Textbooks from the 16th to 18th Centuries*. The author summarizes four books:

- (1) *The Marchants Avizo* by John Brown (1589);
- (2) *An Essay on Drapery* by William Scott (1635);
- (3) *The Complete Tradesman* by N.H. Merchant (1684); and
- (4) *The Complete English Tradesman* by Daniel Defoe (1726).

He points out that these works were mainly about facts, data, and practical actions; as a result, they offered no discussion of branding as such. In those books the main marketing advice was to behave in a virtuous way that would please God, and the chief recommendation was to protect one’s reputation by paying his/her bills. Thus, whereas the early literature discussed the importance of creating and keeping a positive repute, it did not recognize that doing so was a version of branding, that is, a way of affecting the perception of the offering beyond its function.

Despite its early roots, long history, and power, the concept of branding did not emerge as a central part of thinking in marketing until well into the twentieth century. Precisely, Stern (2006) suggests that the term “brand” entered marketing in 1922, as a compound expression (i.e. brand name) meaning a trade or proprietary name. Butler (1914) is among the early studies. He was especially sensitive to branding as a source of conflict among manufacturers, wholesalers, and retailers, who competed to position themselves as the dominant brand of consumer choice. Relatedly, Butler (1914, p. 189) commented that:

The use of private brands by retailers is a very real obstacle to the manufacturer of nationally advertised good who wishes to obtain the widest possible distribution.

In another early work, Cherington (1920, p. 150) saw branding as a rising phenomenon effectuated by both salesmanship and advertising, and referred to its uses as “aggressive sales methods”. He recognized the importance of advertising and the use of trademarks and labels, and saw quality as an essential accompaniment to branding. He also noted that “the appeal to the public to buy. . . by brand has become so general as to be in many lines of merchandise the characteristic rather than the exceptional method of sale” (Cherington, 1920, p. 153).

In 1927, Maynard, Weidler, and Beckman published *Principles of Marketing* with a fairly extensive chapter on “Brands and brand policies,” indicating the rising importance of the role of branding. These early authors were typically focused on marketing as the distribution of merchandise from producer to consumer. A review of the Maynard *et al.* (1927) volume by Daubman (1928, p. 181) praised it, but commented that “the two most important forces in this [marketing] field, advertising and salesmanship, have been neglected”. On the other hand, Clark (1927) also published a *Principles of Marketing* in which he said that:

Advertising and branding are important means of selling the standardized products of individual producers. Advertising, or other selling effort, tends to establish in the minds of prospective customers an idea of character and quality (p. 403).

Despite the existence of these early works, theory and research lagged considerably. Narrow views on the concept of branding are present, for instance, in Converse (1927) and Brown (1925). In *Selling Policies*, Converse (1927, p. 396), a noted professor at the University of Illinois, asserts almost casually that “Consumer advertising of individual brands can be done only when the goods are identified or when the advertiser sells directly to the consumers”. In a similar, narrow tone, Edmund Brown (1925, p. 3) of the University of North Carolina defines marketing as “the process of transferring goods through commercial channels from producer to consumer.” Brown (1925, p. 422) sees the brand as merely denotative. He writes:

The term brand is often used as synonymous with trade-mark, although it does not always have the same significance. The trade-mark implies an exclusive property right. The brand, on the other hand, may be merely a label describing a particular variety and grade of goods.

Yet more revealing than these undeveloped conceptualizations is the complete neglect of attention to branding. For example, professor Roland Vaile’s copy of the book *Selling Policies* stored an item of ephemera – a syllabus for a 1930 marketing course titled, *B.A. 6 7 su*. The textbooks listed on the syllabus are *Selling Policies*, *Risk and Risk-bearing* by Hardy, and *Problems in Sales Management* by Tosdal. The main topics included:

- review of classification of commodities and of markets;
- cost of marketing;
- is the cost of distribution too high?;
- causes and results of hand to mouth buying;
- can the small merchant compete with the large store?; and
- resale price maintenance.

Notably, this early course outline makes no reference to branding.

The narrow view and neglect of the concept of branding were, however, not restricted to earlier works. More recent examples are Bartels' *Marketing Theory and Metatheory* (Bartels, 1970) and *The History of Marketing Thought* (Bartels, 1988). His work is detailed and thorough but, other than brief mention of Levy's writing (p. 265), it ignores the topic of branding.

Branding – business practice

Before the widespread adoption of branding as a business practice, brands were little associated with the sale of retail goods because many products distributed for consumers' consumption were sold as staples in bulk. Commonly, the one general store in town carried commodities such as sacks of coffee beans, slabs of cheese, and barrels of pickles without naming their specific sources. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, products came increasingly to be packaged, labeled, and promoted, thus adding the identity of the source to the utility of the product. The names of their producers became regarded as sources of added value. Producers such as Folger (1872), Kraft (1903), and Vlastic (1942) showed pride in their brands by putting their names on their coffee, cheese, and pickles, respectively.

Characteristically, before the Second World War, the major brands pioneered and conquered their product fields so strongly as to be almost generic (Carpenter and Nakamoto, 1989). When Lionel trains made miniature billboards to accompany their sets, they used top brands such as Lifebuoy soap, Black Jack gum, Ipana toothpaste, Vitalis hair oil, Shredded Wheat, Uneeda biscuits, Sunkist, and Coca-Cola. In this period, major forces that influenced branding developments were the growth of nationwide magazines and radio, and the need for advertising agencies to both create advertisements and make plans and purchases of media. Moore and Reid (2008) highlight the importance of the media in this process by saying:

This [the evolution of branding] is largely a phenomenon that could have only occurred starting at the end of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century, due to the media (TV, radio, print advertising, e-marketing, etc.) (Moore and Reid, 2008, p. 429).

In the 1930s, psychological theories, insights, and methods began to enrich marketing thinking and research. Simultaneously, marketing research started to show signs of growth as managers of competing brands sought to understand the increasing segmentation of the mass market. In 1939, for instance, Ernest Dichter carried out qualitative analyses of Ivory Soap and Plymouth cars. In trying to account for segmentation, demographic information was not always sufficient or satisfying. Sometimes, for example, there were no significant differences between two user groups

in their age, sex, and income distributions, so those characteristics did not appear to account for their different marketing behaviors.

In summary, this section illustrated that whereas marketing as an academic discipline remained narrowly focused; devoting much of its effort to logistics and distribution, business led the developments in the early days of the concept of branding. We will explore next how a new concept (i.e. brand image) and the thinking that emerged from it assisted managers in dealing with the issue, discussed above, regarding the lack of differentiation in the market.

The brand image

Brand image: a major advancement in branding

The Second World War had a great impact on the competitive situation in the marketplace. With the productive resources created for the war effort, the accumulation of capital, and the pent-up consumer demand, the late 1940s and the 1950s produced an outpouring of goods and a surge in buying that was termed a “Consumer Revolution”. That phenomenon led to intensive competition and proliferation of brands. In this scenario, minor brands and new brands came forth to challenge the top names. For example, McDonalds and Burger King fought for the hamburger market, Pepsi-Cola competed more vigorously with Coca-Cola, and Ipana faded before the growth of Colgate and Crest. Modern times also saw big names in coffee such as Maxwell House (“Good to the last drop”) and B/G (“The bottomless cup”) destroyed by the onslaught of a new style coffee-house brand – Starbucks.

Gardner and Levy (1955), in *The Product and the Brand*, pointed out that consumers were confronted with making choices among brands, often in instances when they could not discern differences among the products. That was especially the case when the brands made the same claims of superiority. They noted, for example, that competing brands of detergents made the following similar claims (Gardner and Levy, 1955, p. 34):

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.

Given this lack of distinction, the authors called for “greater awareness of the social and psychological nature of products – whether brands, media, companies, institutional figures, services, industries, or ideas” (Gardner and Levy, 1955, p. 34). They crystallized the insight that consumers are guided by their brand image, that is, a “governing product and brand personality that is unified and coherently meaningful” (Gardner and Levy, 1955, p. 39). They also advised marketing managers to think of the elements of the marketing mix “as a contribution to the complex symbol that is the brand image – as part of the long-term investment in the reputation of the brand” (Gardner and Levy, 1955, p. 39). Levy (1959) followed with the influential *Symbols for Sale*, which offers a fuller explication of the symbolic nature of products and brands. That work is often quoted for holding that “People buy things not only for what they can do, but also for what they mean” (Gardner and Levy, 1955, p. 118) – a statement that, obvious as it may be, served as a spur to new directions of research. In addition to the focus on what managers did to create their brands, Gardner and Levy’s work turned attention to how consumers perceived those brands. The Gardner and Levy article led the *Harvard Business Review* issue and caused a sensation in the business world. Schwarzkopf (2008) describes the situation:

It was not before the mid-1950s however and the arrival of David Ogilvy on Madison Avenue that the idea of the brand image became a common staple within the global advertising industry (Fox, 1984; Millman, 1988; Tungate, 2000; Haygood, 2007). The British immigrant to the US, Ogilvy, had read about the notion that a brand held holistic and personal characteristics in a *Harvard Business Review* article by Sidney Levy and Burleigh Gardner in March 1955 (Gardner and Levy, 1955). The article under the title “The Product and the Brand” was a revelation for Ogilvy and the rest of the advertising world because it made explicit what many of the more innovative agencies, such as Lord & Thomas, J. Walter Thompson or W. S. Crawford’s had practiced for at least three decades. This practice was summarized by Ogilvy in his agency’s creative credo: “Every advertisement is part of the long-term investment in the personality of the brand” (Schwarzkopf, 2008).

The last sentence was a paraphrase from the article which was widely cited and continued to be anthologized in various later collections such as Britt (1983), Busch (1964), Sandage and Fryburger (1969), and Sturdivant (1971).

There was mixed acceptance of these ideas. For example, although the monumental Oxford English Dictionary recognized the term in 1959, it raised a disdainful eyebrow at it, putting it in quotes and claiming, “In the jargon of the P.R. trade, there is as yet no ‘brand image’ for the Prime Minister of Japan.” Of course, they were wrong, as the Prime Minister of Japan inevitably had a brand image.

Resistance to the idea of branding persists among managers who dislike being associated with marketing despite having to market their goods. Seabrook (2010, p. 66) for example writes that:

In its packaging, the [Dyson] company did not rely on a striking logo or a “brand image,” such as, say, the red squiggly tail of the Dirt Devil. Instead Dyson offered a brand story . . . Dyson is in the paradoxical position of being the chief marketer of an anti-marketing philosophy, and the name behind a brand that pretends to having nothing to do with branding.

Despite such resistance and many misunderstandings, the Gardner and Levy article had tremendous influence on marketing practice and research by launching the term “brand image”, which became widely used. As such, it is now prevalent in English and in other languages. For example, French: *image de marque*; Japanese: ブランドイメージ; Spanish: *imagen de marca*; Mandarin: 品牌形象; Portuguese: *imagem de marca*. It is interesting to note that ブランドイメージ is written in a phonetic syllabary, pronounced roughly: “bu-ran-do i-mei-ji,” as a loan-word from the English, whereas the Chinese characters sensitively reflect the meanings of mouths (tastes, preferences, and morals), badge or sign (often made by heating metal), a shape, and the representation of an idea.

One of the primary expressions of the growth in branding was the search for a great logo. Successful early designs distinguished Mercedes-Benz, Playboy, CBS, Air Canada, Westinghouse, and the Bell Telephone Company. Among the greatest are Coca-Cola, McDonalds, Nike, Apple, and Starbucks. In addition to logos is the use of related figures, special elements of the line, visualizations, and sounds that represent the brand, speak of its character, and add to its unique appeal. Nike enlists the top athletes of the day; and there are Ronald McDonald and Budweiser’s Clydesdale horses. Other noteworthy examples are Coco Chanel’s classic “little black dress” that endures along with her Chanel No. 5 perfume, Coca-Cola’s legend of the pharmacist who invented its secret recipe, and the music from Thus Spake Zarathustra that

announces the film, *2001: The Space Odyssey* – all of which add excitement to their identities and create passionate adherents.

The maturation of branding: it is now a symbol, an emotion, a partner

Since the 1950s, the study of brands and branding grew gradually. The comprehensive compendium *Marketing Theory: Distinguished Contributions* (Brown and Fisk, 1984) gave slight attention to the subject beyond brand loyalty. A natural outgrowth of awareness of branding is the literature that questioned what constituted brand loyalty, whether it meant anything other than the measurement of repeat purchase and how to create and sustain it. Paralleling the research in brand loyalty was that in brand imagery. The latter remained influential and flourishing due to the works of Levy and many others. Several of Levy's articles about brands were collected in *Brands, Consumers, Symbols, and Research* (Levy, 1999).

In the second half of the twentieth century, the branding concept expanded in terms of both application and thinking. Early ideas continued to be echoed but in a manner that clearly showed the advancements of the concept. Meenaghan (1995, p. 27) sums up that, "At a more emotional/symbolic level a prime function of advertising is to achieve for a brand a particular personality or character in the perception of its market. This is achieved by imbuing the brand with specific associations or values. A particular feature of all great brands is their association with specific values, both functional and symbolic." Both function and fantasy are important; an idea that reflects postmodern thinking (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995). As Gardner and Levy (1955, p. 35) said, "a public image, a character or personality. . . may be more important for the overall status [and sales] of the brand" than are many facts about the product. Echoing that point, the Social Research, Inc. study of automobiles reported in Newman's (1957), *Motivation Research and Marketing Management*, claims that autos were psychologically significant as extensions of the self (anticipating Belk, 1988). Also, if brands are seen as having personalities comparable anthropomorphically to those of people, it follows that people can have relationships with them. Fournier (1998) elaborated this idea in a significant addition to the literature on relationship marketing (Berry, 1983).

The dramatic shift in the importance of branding to the consumer, and the awareness of such a shift by managers and marketing researchers were expressed in several ways. The Gardner and Levy (1955) article about brand image focused attention on the consumers' perceptions; and was reinforced by Levy's *Symbols for Sale* (Levy, 1959) and *Interpreting Consumer Mythology* (Levy, 1981). These articles also fostered interest in qualitative research and served as a thread to the rise of Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) as an area of study. Levy's article with Philip Kotler (Kotler and Levy, 1969) describes the broadening of marketing's application to all organizations and individuals, and thus highlights the widespread contemporary use of branding, as reported below. Levy's contribution was recognized by the establishment of the Sidney J. Levy CCT Award, which is given at the annual CCT conference, and by the Harris (2007) article, "Sidney Levy: challenging the philosophical assumptions of marketing". Importantly, the study of consumers as a discipline gained major impetus in 1970 by the creation of the Association for Consumer Research, and in 1974 by the creation of the *Journal of Consumer Research*.

The concept of branding and related ideas were subsequently stimulated particularly by the writings of Aaker (1991, 1995, 2004) and Keller (1993, 1998), who focused on brand equity and brand strategy management. The ubiquity of the concept

is evident in the creation of thousands of brand manager jobs (Glassdoor.com, 2010). Also, most business schools now teach courses about brand management.

With awareness and necessity came specialization and new services. Thousands of brand consultants now offer guidance to achieving the great goal of a strong image, emphasizing the concept anew and encouraging fresh awareness of the idea. For example, Mercer Management Consulting notes common managerial failings and urges, “The new branding. Overcoming the aforementioned misconceptions calls for a new approach to brand strategy” (Almquist and Roberts, 2009). Relatedly, the web site Brandimage.com (2010) claims, “We Give Life to Brands,” and “Design is the Best Way to Build Brands. We believe design is one of the most powerful tools for brands to create strong relationships with their customers.”

In sum, in a short period (i.e. the last 55 years) the functions and thoughts related to branding evolved from ownership and reputation to brand image, symbolic values, fantasy, and relationship partner. Notably, it was in the twentieth century that brand, an entity that until then had mostly been acted on by its immediate creators, became more democratic and absorbed inputs from a large array of actors. This relatively recent development of the concept naturally also widened its applicability in both business and research – a topic discussed next.

The outcomes of brand’s evolution

The growth of the field of brand management and the common use of the term have disseminated the idea that everything and everyone has a brand image. Given the historical focus in the present work, the following illustrations of the current status of branding provide concrete evidence of the transformations that the concept has undergone.

Practical application

In the applied arena, brands are now attached to commodities: As Fredrix (2010) explains, “Baby-carrot farmers are launching a campaign that pitches the little, orange, crunchy snacks as daring, fun and naughty – just like junk food. . . The goal is to get people to think of baby carrots as a brand they can get excited about.” Places also have brand images: In a report about the current challenges faced by the state of Arizona as a result of its immigration law, McClay (2010, p. A10) quoted the head of China Mist Brands saying, “People were oddly unaware that it was going to cause more problems for the state’s brand.” Besides commodities and places, abstract and intangible entities such as political parties are also managed as a brand: Senator Jim DeMint complained that “appropriations for parochial projects. . . undermined our brand as Republicans and our entire anti-big government agenda” (Moore, 2010, p. A11). While the early branding of people as slaves possessed negative connotations, its more recent connotations and purposes are positive and complex. Wall Street Journal reporter Opdyke (2010, p. D5) says “my travels help brand me an Asia expert, which helps my company build [that] readership.” In a similar vein, this inquiry found instances of branding attached to spheres such as the military, schools, museums, churches, and religion itself.

Research

Interest in the concept of branding and its pervasive application has led to a growing body of contemporary research. To achieve an understanding of the current literature

on branding, we categorized a sample of papers drawn from the *Journal of Consumer Research*, the *Journal of Marketing*, the *Journal of Marketing Research*, and presentations at the 2010 conference of the Association for Consumer Research.

The inquiry resulted in a list of eight major topics under which current research topics can be categorized:

- (1) learning and consumer prior knowledge;
- (2) branding and the human senses;
- (3) culture and national identity;
- (4) mind-set;
- (5) goals;
- (6) commitment, loyalty, and brand relationships;
- (7) self-view, social-view, and personality; and
- (8) the brand and the firm.

This variety in research topics highlights the complexity and applicability that the evolution of branding has afforded the concept.

Overall, the branding literature tells us that brands have become learning and communication devices through which we define and convey aspects of our selves (Schulz and Stout, 2010), of our national identity (Dong and Tian, 2009), and of the groups we desire to be associated with and those we wish to be disassociated from (Han *et al.*, 2010; White and Dahl, 2007). Brands have been anthropomorphized (Aggarwal and McGill, 2010) and, as such, they can have sincere or exciting personalities (Aaker *et al.*, 2004; Swaminathan *et al.*, 2009), which can be malleable or fixed (Yorkston *et al.*, 2010). Those personality traits influence not only brand choice but also how consumers judge brands' actions related to social causes (Torelli *et al.*, 2010). Brands also give birth to other entities called brand extensions. Their personifications make brands worth developing committed and loyal relationships (Raju *et al.*, 2009). Based on particular characteristics, those relationships can be categorized as exchange or communal (Aggarwal, 2004). In some cases the relationship becomes such a regular part of life that the brands become invisible or unnoticeable – they simply exist in the background (Coupland, 2005). Brand-relationships can develop in children as young as seven years old (Chaplin and John, 2005) and, as in human relationships, the parties are free to break away as soon as the connection becomes unprofitable (Fournier and Alvarez, 2010). However, younger consumers tend to switch brands more often than do their older counterparts (Commuri, 2009; Lambert-Pandraud and Laurent, 2010).

In short, our search through recent instances of business uses and scientific programs in branding provides evidence for the current ubiquitous status of branding. At its origin, the brand was an entity with few and specific uses (i.e. inflexibility). Currently, brands are characterized by multi-dimensionality and malleability. They allow the astute brand manager to artistically create and recreate. They reach all human senses and incorporate anthropomorphic traits. In sum, as discussed next, the business and academic communities have turned brands into an invaluable tool that, in some aspects, outshines the concept of marketing itself.

Management works at branding

The contemporary use of the notion of branding is equated with achieving and managing an identity and has in many contexts supplanted the word marketing, perhaps as a way of avoiding the more stigmatic aspects of the latter word. The core assertiveness of the brand concept, its connection to symbolism, fantasy, and design, the vitality it adds to inanimate objects, and the distinction and sophistication it adds to live ones make it more appealing than the sheer commercialism widely associated with the word “marketing”. Nowadays, branding offers the malleability, the freedom, and the potential to play with meanings – a valuable asset in liberatory post-modern times (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995). This malleability was reflected in the words of a fashion commentator who said, “As hip designers cozy up to century-old heritage clothing, those timeless brands are recognizing their coolness – and warming to high fashion.” Stern’s (2006) discussion of the vast number of metaphors currently used to make sense of brands (e.g. brand identity, brand reputation, brand image, brand personality) is a testament to brand’s flexibility and complexity.

Branding is exciting and alluring, it is a challenge to creativity; its burning, fiery heart suggests its power to draw devotees, fans, co-creators, and communities rather than merely buyers and users. It implies the union of technology and aesthetics, the integration of the pragmatism of engineering and the elevation and elegance of art, addressed to the sociology and psychology of the intended audiences. A brand manager is more glamorous – that is, able to cast a magic spell – than a marketing manager.

A tool for the manager seeking to give life to that magic was offered by Levy (1974). He suggested that the ideal marketing goal is represented by a Functional-Psychosocial-Aesthetic pyramid (FPAP) (see Figure 1) that integrates the purpose of the object (Functions) with its human audience (People) and its impact on the senses (Art).

This appreciation of branding is especially notable among sellers of luxury, who are required to adopt extraordinary approaches to distinguishing the products and justifying high prices (Kapferer and Bastien, 2009). In *The Wall Street Journal’s* luxury magazine, for instance, Levine (2010) writes about the career of Inès de la Fressange and her success in reviving the failed Roger Vivier brand. Diego Della Valle hired La Fressange “to blow life into its embers” (an apt metaphor for the necessary heating). La Fressange says:

I choose the flowers and I interview and hire all the saleswomen. I wanted every Vivier store to smell the same way, so I created an amber-scented candle that’s in all of them. Basically, everything that leaves Vivier passes before my eyes. There are very few recipes for great brands, but one of them is to be vigilant about every single detail (Levine, 2010, p. 30).

As La Fressange realizes, full scale attention to branding means creating imagery that affects all the senses. Branding reflects the reality of the core product, its facts and features, its functions and benefits, as well as the surrounding aura of its aesthetic, its music, its texture, its visualization, and its fantasy-like existence in the culture as it relates to societal and customer mythology. Ultimately a brand is an opus, a complex design, a mosaic, a symphony, an evolving cultural construction that benefits from a knowledgeable and perceptive director, and that fires the imagination. The most successful and iconic brands go beyond the ordinary elements (the four essences of earth, air, fire, and water), to become quintessential, and transcendently so. Apple™

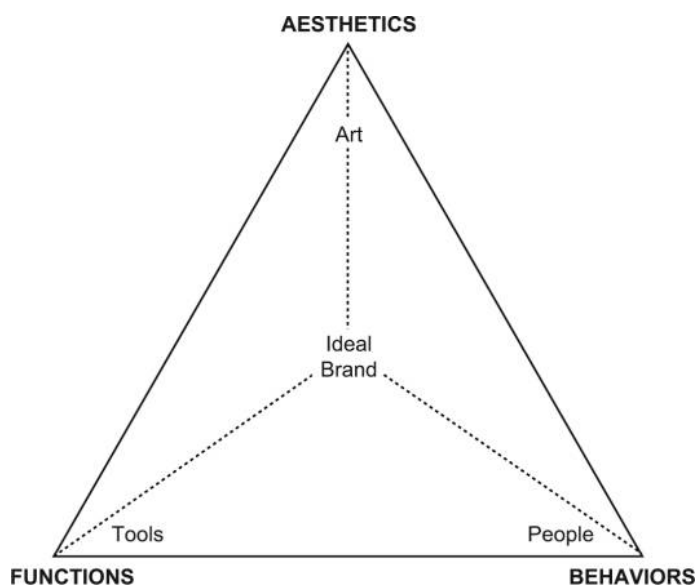


Figure 1.
Ideal Brand Pyramid

is the epitome of such an FPAP brand, achieving its status as the world's most eminent brand through its integration of innovative technology, high quality design, and widespread appeal.

The future of branding

According to the American Historical Association (2008), a major reason for studying history is its relevance to the present and future. Specifically, "The past causes the present, and so the future." Thus, based on our investigation of the history of branding, we discuss three topics as fundamental for practitioners and students of branding.

Can technology pose a threat to brands?

Veblen (1899) explained the role of conspicuous consumption and branding in society by pointing out that, with the growth of population, the individual could no longer trust that others would recognize the status imbued in the goods he/she consumed. In order to ensure such recognition, goods needed to be branded with a mark that would function as "the signature of one's pecuniary strength" (Veblen, 1899, p. 54). Even though branded goods have for centuries been a major instrument with which people communicate status and other meanings, recent technological advances have created instruments that become suitable alternatives in that regard.

In a recent report titled, *Global Faces and Networked Places*, the Nielsen Corporation (2009, p. 1) documents that: Social Networking has been the global consumer phenomenon of 2008. Two-thirds of the world's Internet population visits a social network or blogging site and the sector now accounts for almost 10 percent of all Internet time. Consistent with that point, Facebook now has over 500 million members who each month spend about 700 billion minutes on the web site and upload over 30 billion pictures to it (Wortham, 2010). Besides pictures, technology has enabled regular

individuals to easily display their lives on video. Youtube, for example, reports that in May 2010, 14.6 billion videos were watched on its web site (comScore, 2010).

The implication of these instruments (e.g. pictures, videos, blogs, scraps, tweets) is that, compared to branded goods and services, they provide easy, inexpensive, quick, and broad-reaching ways of conveying meanings, values, and views to one's social circle and beyond. The scenario previously characterized by difficulties in successfully representing one's status through leisure and consumption (Veblen, 1899) has been modified with the technological advances witnessed in the last few decades. Ritzer (2001, p. 215) captures this idea in his statement that, "with the mass media and especially the Internet we need not leave our living rooms to observe what other people are consuming." In 1963, Levy saw marketing as "a process of providing customers with parts of a potential mosaic from which they, as artists of their own lifestyles, can pick and choose to develop the composition that for the time may seem the best" (Levy, 1963, p. 150). Brands are an integral part of that composition, but technology has added new components. Whereas brands' well-established status in society may partially shield them from threats such as those posed by technology, the brand manager's imagination is more than ever called on in order to find new ways that brands can exert their function as a carrier of meaning; or perhaps new functions of brands altogether.

Brands and the human senses

In a recent online article, Danziger (2010) reports that:

A whiff of flowers may keep you from overindulging at supper. Smelling something inconsistent with what's on your plate dampens your appetite, research shows. In another study by Wansink, people who were served plain oatmeal scented with apple and cinnamon ate more than those given oatmeal that smelled like macaroni and cheese. OK, no need for unappetizing combinations, but some slight sensory confusion – a fresh bouquet or a scented candle – might help you limit portions.

This excerpt captures the richness present in the relation between subtle senses and consumers' decisions. Recent research has started to consider those relations by evaluating the effect of bodily sensations on brand evaluation (Labroo and Nielsen, 2010), the influence of visual complexity on brand attention (Pieters *et al.*, 2010), and the implication of phonetic sound repetitions on brand evaluation and choice (Argo *et al.*, 2010). Perhaps, a promising area of branding research and business investment is one devoted to a better understanding of our basic senses. Parallel to research focusing on higher-order needs (e.g. belong, self-actualization) research effort could also seek answers to issues such as: Humans have an acute ability to assess the outside world through sight and hearing, but not through smell. We, however, excel in recording and remembering smells for long periods of time (Mystery of the Senses, 2007). With that said, does the sense through which a brand message is encoded influence consumers' recall, liking, and successful understanding of specific aspects of the brand message? Are there certain brand personalities that benefit from being encoded through specific senses? What implications does the age-related decline of certain senses have on brand evaluation and choice? Since flavor perception is comprised of an olfaction and a gustation component (Dalton *et al.*, 2000), is the preponderance of one over the other in a flavor-related brand beneficial to certain brands? Given the large body of knowledge in the marketing and psychology literatures on subliminal priming through vision (e.g. Chartrand *et al.*, 2008; Karremans *et al.*, 2006; Trappey, 1996), how can marketing

scholars, practitioners, and consumers benefit from increased research in subliminal priming through hearing, for example? A research agenda that attends to all our senses (versus one that is highly focused on sight and hearing) is likely to provide us with a more complete and nuanced picture of the relation between brands and consumers.

Brand: the backbone of marketing; the concern of all company departments

The brand is an interdisciplinary creation. As the Ideal Brand Pyramid implies (Levy, 1974), the successful manager requires input from all the contributing arts and sciences and the ability to integrate them into a cohesive and distinctive entity.

Professor Price (2010) claimed that, “We [members of the marketing discipline] bring brands to the discussion, which no other discipline does. Brand is a fundamental question in Marketing.” Whereas those are widely-accepted and celebrated statements within the academic community, marketing practitioners who take a more inclusive approach might be in a more advantageous position. Precisely, marketing practitioners are in the forefront of any effort to turn mere signs and logos into meaning-loaded brands. Low and Fullerton (1994, p. 173) mentioned that, “Brand managers are central coordinators of all marketing activities for their brand and are responsible for developing and implementing the marketing plan.” Kotler (1988) has, however, warned that the focused attention of the brand manager in one brand is likely to create a professional that is production, instead of consumer-focused. This is a particularly dangerous strategy in postmodern times when “it is not to brands that consumers will be loyal, but to images and symbols, especially to images and symbols that they produce while *they* consume. Because these symbols keep shifting, consumer loyalties cannot be fixed” (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995, p. 251). Firat and Venkatesh (1995, p. 251) added that, “The consumer finds his/her liberatory potential in subverting the market rather than being seduced by it.” Therefore, successful firms will likely be those that involve not only the brand manager but individuals with expertise in the creation, development, and management of the images and symbols to which consumers become and remain attached, as they become the brands they create themselves.

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