

PSYCHOLOGY OF BRAND: STRENGTHENING BRAND IN BRAIN

Dr. Tarique Anwer

Assistant Professor,
Department Of Management,
Siwan Engineering and Technical Institute,
Siwan.

Abstract:

The science of brand building has taken new dives into the zone of the human brain. Defining it as a representative of symbols, mark, or packaging and service does not shed much light on the psychological function of a brand. New exploration of the human brain reveals new nuggets on the strong connection between brain and brand. Great marketers are using brands not just to improve awareness but they are using it as an invisible tool to manipulate our brains in surprisingly profound ways. Branding is unconsciously inferring how we think and how we should conceptualize ourselves and how we flash out our identities out to the social world. The effect of brand has infected the zone of emotion also. A strong brand can make us feel emotions that have nothing to do with the functions of their products. A great brand establishes nodes with various associations related to a brand inside our brain. Various nodes associated with brands resonate and reinforce each other's efforts inside our brain, thus creating a synergistic effect.

Keywords:

Brand, Brain, Memory, Nodes, Awareness, Emotion

Introduction:

Great brand manager also takes the responsibility of bringing about change in the brain by constantly sending messages about the quality and associative features of a product to the targeted market to the extent that the idea of its quality gets wired in the brain. The stronger the brand wiring the more resonance of the brand image and associated stimuli roll in into the node of brain. This process creates mental structure and helps consumers organize their knowledge about product and services in a way that clarifies their decision making and, in the process, provide value to the firm. In short, brands are the game of the brain, its brain marketing. It creates mental connection between a product and the consumer's behaviour.

Brain and Brand:

Strong brand is not created out of a vacuum. You cannot generate trust for your brand by doing online stuff, brandishing a brand and doing some gimmick stuff. You must have vision and deep insight about customer's belief, values and aspiration, because it's easy to get people riled up and angry about nothing. But to have hope, people need to feel that they are going to get what they aspire. They should have the hope that they are on the winning side of the brand.

Trust for brand factors come out of evidence based on past experience. The past experience extrapolates into hope for the future. Great companies take the responsibility of making a hope of the people tangible. Hopeful customers have faith about the future performance of a brand. Customer's faith with the tangibilized hope for the brand is so strong that they start to experience the brand before having it. The anticipation level before using the preferred product is quite intense. People feel and see their brand before they have it. They predict that having the brand is rewarding, their level of dopamine spikes in anticipation. It is the anticipation of reward not the fulfillment for it that gets consumer behaviour ticked.

“Interestingly, the reward system that is activated in the brain when you receive a reward is the same that is activated when you anticipate rewards.” (Clear, 2019, p. 106).

While with the new product (which might offer better value) people have vague or no anticipation about the product. And under the condition of an unconditioned brain people tend to form their own opinion. Often these opinions are a reflection of confirmation bias: seeing what they expect to see. Loyal customers see the negative aspect of the new product which their favourite products don't have and ignore the positive aspect of the new product.

Anticipation associated with preferred brands spurs our imagination and craving. It also keeps stimuli and images of associated with other unanticipated brands at bay. The element of anticipation has its relation with craving part of the brain. To understand why customers have spontaneous inclination for their preferred brand we need to dig deeper into the mechanism of the brain.

Consumers association and their craving with specific brands are characterized by wanting and desire elements which are emotional in nature. Our brain contains larger space for the desired factors. The wanting centers in the brain is large. The brain stem, the nucleus accumbens, the ventral tegmental area, the dorsal striatum, the amygdale, and portion of the prefrontal. Consumer's behavior tends to move smoothly when he is desirous to purchase an anticipated brand. By comparison, the liking part of the brain, which is not the emotional centre of the brain, is much smaller. They are referred to as “hedonic hot spot” and are distributed like tiny islands throughout the brain. Unlike want which is emotional in nature, liking is calculative and evaluative. Most of our behaviours are driven not by liking. When we look at shiny or new products it spurs the liking mechanism and does not drive anticipation instead, we go into calculative mode. Calculation which is the child of liking, infact, slow down purchasing behaviour, it makes us cynic specially when we already are having loyalty for 'A' brand we spurn out the new 'B' brands. Either way, the purchasing done through liking may or may not allow the image of brand settle into the memory socket. Moreover, since the mechanism of liking is calculative and contains smaller space people in the brain, people don't feel driven to buy or repeat the buying.

“Researchers have found that 100 percent of the nucleus acumens are activated during wanting. Meanwhile only 10 percent of the structure is activated during liking.” (Clear, 2019, p. 101).

These insights reveal the fact that the emotional issue like loyalty breeds another emotion – desire. Desire is the engine that drives behavior because it has the strong back up of the anticipation that precedes it. It is the craving that leads to the response.

Placebo Effect in Building Brand:

People usually see what they expect to see and what they expect to see is usually based on familiarity, experience or preconceived set of notions. In marketing context people tend to perceive products and its attributes according to their own expectation. A student who has been told by his friend that a particular professor is interesting and dynamic will probably perceive the professor in that manner when the class begins. In short, a person expectation is born out from the layers of experience and knowledge. In short, expectation is manifestation of his past experience of life. Experience and exposures to marketing activities create and updates consumer expectations for experiencing brand in the future.

Simply put, constant marketing exposures and experiences with the product make the people's expectation susceptible to purchasing behaviour. It moulds people point of view and idea. The classic placebo effect can be vividly glanced through the demonstration conducted by Dr. Read Montague, the director of Human Neuron marketing Lab at Baylor College of medicine in Houston. He decided to probe the results more deeply. He selected some of the volunteers for the conduct of research. When the volunteers were given the beverage in an unbranded glass, the result was exactly the same as was the famous Pepsi – Coke research which was conducted 35 years ago. More than half of the subjects preferred Pepsi.

*“While taking a sip out of Pepsi, the entire new set of volunteers registered a flurry of activity in the ventral putamen, a region of the brain that's stimulated when we find taste appealing.”
(Martin, 2011, p. 18.)*

Interestingly, in the second experiment Dr. Montague decided to let the subjects know the name of the brand of the sip. The result: 75 percent of the respondent claimed to prefer Coke. What's more, has it been observed a change in the location of brain activity? In addition to the ventral putamen blood flows were registering in the medial prefrontal cortex, a portion of the brain responsible, among other duties, for higher thinking and discernment.

The further indicates very clearly that the two areas in the brain were engaged in a mute tug of war between rational and emotional thinking. And during mini seconds of grappling and indecision, the emotion rose up like mutinous soldiers and defeated respondents' rational preference for Pepsi, and that's the moment- Coke won.

All the positive associations with Coke –its history, logo, heritage design and fragrances; their own childhood memory of Coke, Coke's TV and print ads over the years, the sheer inarguable, inexorable, ineluctable, emotional cockiness of the brand beat back their rational, natural preferences for the taste of Pepsi. Why? Because emotional is the way in which our brain encodes things of value and the brand that engages us emotionally.

Branding is an Emotional Game:

“Emotional inspires action and action inspires emotion. Emotion is irrational meaning they cannot be reasoned with.” (Manson, 2019, p. 36)

A customer whose feeling is completely entrenched with his preferred brand does not bog down in the face of fleeting data. Contrary to it, his feeling brain becomes more defensive and protects his choice with his preexisting data. His feeling brain acts like a verbally abusive boyfriend who refuses to pull over and ask directions- he hates being told.

In the case of Coke, the Montague experiment demonstrates that the same people, who discarded the naked bottle Coke, slither into the zone of Coke brand unobtrusively as it has been conducted under exposure of the brand name- Coca Cola. And the once victorious sweet Pepsi beverage got vanquished.

The outcry of the American people in the wake of stopping the old version of Coke also implies the fact that branding has more to do with feeling than reason. Had Coke conducted the research on how far the Coke brand represents American heritage, history and culture, the company would have understood the real and emotional value of it and focused on the classiness and highlighted the Americanisms of the cola taste?

Delusion of Brand:

Emotional association with a brand makes a customer's victim of self-serving bias. It makes consumers prejudiced and self-centered. Consumers start to assume what feels right is right. This led a consumer to make snap judgment about his preferred product to which it had shared his feeling. He has exaggerated feelings for his preferred product. This leads him to define and see the product through the magnifying lens. So, when a person strolls through the aisle and sees his favourite product sitting amidst many products in a shelf, his eye sparkles and feeling dilates, the lenses of his eye instantly capture his favorite product without any iota of distraction. Nothing sort of alternatives can take away his laser sharp lenses.

Many of the people's perceptions are the virgin area ready to be impressed upon by the external cues. People are not born with an intrinsic want for innovative and self-esteemed products. People lack insight for future products, (how many of us thought of mobile, laptop, LCD TV three decades ago). But people have the intrinsic drive to make their life easy; they have the drive for self-esteem and self-actualization. Brand builders understand how to translate this intrinsic drive into motifs and beliefs through various cues induces marketing activities like advertising, salespeople, and logo, frequent use of bill boards and showcases and positioning statements. Great marketers create new perceptions for a new product through planting the seeds of expectation. These expectations are born out of marketing effort. When marketers, through their imaginative insight, build a product that strikes the right chord with people's expectations, the foundation of the brand is laid out. But building the right product is not enough in building a brand. The product needs to be part of people's minds. For example,

“UNIVAC was the first mainframe computer but was surpassed by IBM. Thanks to the massive marketing effort, IBM got into the mind first and won the computer battle early.” (Ries, 2012, p. 16)

It was when the image and its associated benefit ingrained into the mind of the people, the brand came into effect. This preemptive attempt leads great marketers to pitch in to capture the virgin province of the memory strongly. The preemptive approach means that the first new concept will swamp the uncluttered lane of memory without much mental conversation and debate. It keeps the rational and logical faculty of people at bay since the logical mind works when it is already rippled with competitive brands. Under the backdrop of competition, the cluttered thought goes into evaluative mode. For example, a car is better because there is another car which is mediocre.

Because of the noncompetitive environment the people in the 1980s considered Ambassador cars as a great car. But once competition came along, the king of the Indian road staggered. The success of Nokia 1310, 1315 models in the 90s is another example of preemptive benefits.

Encroaching upon the virgin brain with new concepts is handy as the image of the product gets wired so strongly into the memory socket to the extent that it becomes indelible and very difficult to replace with other brands. When we form the perception about any product, we start to believe what we want to believe. The image of the brand rolls into the memory zone without much resistance, layering over it the pigment of emotion and hence it gets easily entrenched. And what gets entrenched is vehemently defended no matter how mediocre the brand is.

Marketer’s Responsibility for Consumer’s Brain:

Our brain is miser according to some cognitive psychologists. It has limited energy and therefore does not invest mental energy recklessly. The prime duty of a brain is to help a man to survive and thrive. This disposes the human attention at a very critical position. It discards messages and stimuli which does not help in surviving and thriving. That means our brain focuses on only those stimuli where it figures out hope for survival. Experiencing cappuccino at Starbucks enhances our sense of worthiness and sends a roaring signal to others who cannot afford it.

Great brand managers craft the essence of a brand in such a way as to let the image of the brand enter into the memory lane smoothly. For example, the image of a premium car settles into the memory easily as the image of a royal car generates the image of abundance and royalty. It elevates the status in the society. And help to thrive.

Research in psychology has shown that recognition alone can result in more positive feelings towards nearly anything. The reason being, the past exposures of the brands help people retrieve information about the brand easily. The psychological aspects of familiarity have further been strengthened by Antonio Damasio, a neuroscientist at the University of Iowa through his subtle psychological theory- somatic marker.

Somatic markers are essentially memories of bodily responses and past experiences. It acts like glue which stores and updates every past experience. When we see a product that we had been exposed with in a new situation, our brain is stamped with markers. These markers are rapidly accessed often subconsciously and provide an emotional guide for what to do next. When we make decisions about what to buy, our brain summons and scans incredible amounts of memories, facts and emotions and squeezes them into rapid responses. So, the product which has earned sufficient exposure will trigger familiarity and which in effect causes shoppers to make choices over unfamiliar products.

Thus, when a brand choice is made – even when the decision involves products like computers or anything else the familiar brand will have an edge. It takes ten second to choose TATA salt on a completely unconscious series of images in your brain that leads us straight to an emotional reaction.

All of sudden we knew which brand we wanted, but were completely unaware of the factors- the known logo, childhood memories, reliable image and other considerations that led us to decide for the unconscious purchase. According to the neurological concept of Somatic markers is nothing but dormant data sitting idly in the brain. A great marketer makes the somatic marker intense and strong by adding new and fresh value making the brand animated as to retrieve the memory as and when it is required.

Building Brand is long term process:

A brand is a concept stored in the memory with a network of association. That association is first established; and then they are strengthened over a period of time. Brand building is a long-term investment to establish, especially in a world, where people’s minds are already brimming with thousands of images and its associated elements. Making home into the crowded mind of the people needs imaginative steps.

A new brand must stand out as if it’s going to create a unique concept in the consumer mind. Uniqueness has the tendency to stir our feelings of curiosity. A unique brand stands out different from the homogenous product and differentiating factors engender in us feelings. It makes us feel important and awaken within us the seed of superiority. It means our attention is poised to sight a unique product not with dull attention and fleeting eyes but with the votes of feeling. Attention warped with feeling allows the stimuli of the brand to enter into the lane of memory smoothly. However, building a brand requires discipline and vigorous and constant effort. In gist, brand is a long-term investment to establish. And the reason behind its being a long-term process is whimsical and stubbornness of emotion.

“Yet there are deeper forces behind our resistance to thinking. Questioning ourselves makes the world more unpredictable. It requires us to admit that the fact may have changed, that what was once right may now be wrong. Reconstructing something, we believe deeply can threaten our identities, making us feel as if we are losing part of ourselves.” (Grant, 2021, p. 25)

Emotion has its own agenda. The noble aspect of a brand may work as pull factors but most of the people scorn at accepting the new product as people have the ingrained tendency to select and retain those products which support their believe system and their belief system is the descriptive summation of their past experience and knowledge.

Their past experience, therefore dispose them to live in world of their cherished thought. They become pusillanimous for the new or noble products. This is one of the main reasons why many products fail before capturing the aspiration of the market.

People's feelings are stubborn and hate to listen to any idea which goes against the preexisting and cherished idea or product with which feelings are associated. This is why people feel confident with familiar products. The familiar product is riskless and also congruent to our natural tendency of risk averting nature.

Further, the hustle and bustle of today's life doesn't allow any brand and its image to settle into the seat of memory. With fleeting eyes and attention, our mind grasps only wisp of ideas and new images of products finds it difficult to navigate through the jungle of cluttered mind, let alone its settlement into the memory lane.

Companies often create products for which there is little initial demand. The lack of demand shows people's lack of knowledge about the product. The product is barely imaginable, how could anyone know they wanted it? Product leaders have to prepare markets and educate potential customers to accept products that never before existed. They do it with larger-than-life launches, early adopters' programs and massive marketing education so that people's minds get conditioned and the nobleness turns into familiar.

The larger-than-life launches pull the attention and offer the compelling reason for the trial. But the larger-than-life launch is not enough, it is only through frequency of marketing education by salesmen and other marketing communication and through the back up of Avanti grade service the positive brain neurons get activated and develop stronger connection loops, helping the memory become stronger in the consumer's mind. A single clue, associative word and colour can stir the memory of a brand.

However, the activation of neurons doesn't bubble up for a long time or with a single marketing effort. Our brain has many things to do. It is into the continuous business of discarding stimuli, restoring it, scaling back unnecessary data into the dark hole of unconsciousness. The brand and its associative stimuli with its unique proposition and continuous marketing attempt to reinvigorate and rekindle it stay longer in our brain.

Conclusion:

Brand management is brain management. The brand and its associative stimuli if not shown and rolled in inside the brain, recede from the conscious lane and will reduce to oblivion. From the marketing perspective, the memory needs to be activated from time to time to ensure that consumers don't forget about the brand. This is why many strong brand advertisements pop up in many channels and media despite its great market share.

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