Emerald Insight

British Food Journal

Online branding: the case of McDonald's
Jennifer Rowley

Article information:

Users who downloaded this article also downloaded:

Jennifer Rowley, (2004),"Online branding", Online Information Review, Vol. 28 Iss 2 pp. 131-138 http://
dx.doi.org/10.1108/14684520410531637

Jennifer Rowley, (2009),"Online branding strategies of UK fashion retailers", Internet Research, Vol. 19 Iss
3 pp. 348-369 http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/10662240910965397

Peter Ritchie, (1990),"McDonald#s: A Winner through Logistics", International Journal of Physical
Distribution & Logistics Management, Vol. 20 Iss 3 pp. 21-24 http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/
EUM0000000000356

For Authors

If you would like to write for this, or any other Emerald publication, then please use our Emerald for
Authors service information about how to choose which publication to write for and submission guidelines
are available for all. Please visit www.emeraldinsight.com/authors for more information.

About Emerald www.emeraldinsight.com

Emerald is a global publisher linking research and practice to the benefit of society. The company
manages a portfolio of more than 290 journals and over 2,350 books and book series volumes, as well as
providing an extensive range of online products and additional customer resources and services.

Emerald is both COUNTER 4 and TRANSFER compliant. The organization is a partner of the Committee
on Publication Ethics (COPE) and also works with Portico and the LOCKSS initiative for digital archive
preservation.

CASE STUDY
Online branding: the case of McDonald's

Jennifer Rowley

School for Business and Regional Development,
University of Wales, Bangor, UK

Abstract *This article explores the approaches to the delivery of brand messages through a Web site, taking one of the leading brands, McDonald's, as a case study. The role of brands and branding in the new economy that is characterised by digitisation and globalisation is attracting considerable attention. McDonald's recent "I'm lovin' it" campaign, is being integrated through every element of the business, including its Web site; this campaign therefore presents a useful opportunity to analyse the contribution of the Internet channel to brand building. This case study analysis is conducted on two levels: how the Web site elements are enlisted to reinforce brand messages, and overarching brand strategy themes such as glocalisation, community and channel integration. Further research and development on online branding needs to explore effective strategies for integration of online branding with branding through other channels, and opportunities that the Internet offers for both e-service and brick service companies for building customer relationships and communities.*

Introduction

> A brand is not a name. A brand is not a positioning statement. It is not a marketing message. It is a promise made by a company to its customers and supported by that company (Sterne, 1999).

> I may have intelligent agents that can go out and assemble pages of reports on every camcorder on the market, but I don't have time to read them. I'll buy Sony (Sterne, 1999).

Online branding is discussed in nearly every book on e-marketing or e-business. Some argue that in a world of information overload, brands become ever more important, because they save the customer time, by reducing their search costs. (Ward and Lee, 2000). This position can be further developed by arguing that brand building will be increasingly important in providing continuity and customer commitment in a fast moving marketplace. In an electronic shopping environment where physical interaction is reduced and product qualities and benefits must be distilled and captured in a way that can be communicated over the wires, online branding may be increasingly important. Others argue that with the wealth of information on the Web at their fingertips, coupled with intelligent agents and search engines to help them locate the information, products and services that they need, users will no longer rely on the shorthand of brand. Instead they will gather detailed

information on products and services and make their own judgements on the suitability of a product, thereby making brands superfluous.

There is evidence to suggest that it is difficult to communicate an online brand in the absence of preconceptions already established through other channels. Many of the early dotcoms failed because they needed to establish presence and reputation quickly and the huge marketing budgets that this required undermined their financial stability. A key agenda has been to balance the need to protect and not corrupt established brands as established organisations enter risky "new marketplaces" while leveraging the brand equity of existing brands. In other words the issue has been to create a sense of "the same credibility, but a different presentation". For example, at the symbolic level, Barnes & Noble achieved this by retaining the offline parent brand Barnes & Noble, but launched using the same name, but in a different presentation, barnesandnoble.com.

The earlier click v. brick debate has now been replaced by a recognition that businesses need to take a new look their channels strategies, and to understand both the service and the marketing communication that customers want delivered through each channel, and to develop a robust multi-channel strategy. One perspective is to argue that it is necessary to integrate messages, but differentiate experience. For many businesses, like McDonald's, core service delivery will always be through face-to- face interactions in real environments, but the Internet can play a pivotal role in marketing communications, and brand and relationship building. This article provides a case study analysis of the Internet presence of McDonald's, and a review of some of the devices that it uses to build the brand through this channel.

Case study methodology

A case study approach has been adopted, because understanding of online branding is relatively undeveloped. Case study research is recognised to be suited to new research areas when a fresh perspective is needed (Eisenhardt, 1989). Case studies are a valuable way of looking at the world around us, and asking how or why questions (Yin, 1994). The case study design adopted in this article is a holistic single case design. Typically single case designs are appropriate when the case has something special to reveal. Single case studies may also be used as a preliminary or pilot in multiple case studies (Rowley, 2002). It is argued that the significance of McDonald's as a global brand makes it an appropriate focus for case study analysis. Both practitioners and academics may benefit from a spotlight on this special case.

McDonald's has been chosen as the basis for this case study because it is a large global organisation, and one of the largest global brands. In 2001, McDonald's was ranked in the world's ten most valuable brands (Kotler, 2003). Where leaders go, others will follow. McDonald's is the world's leading food service retailer with more than 30,000 local McDonald's restaurants serving 46

million customers each day in more than 100 countries. An additional reason for selecting McDonald's as the basis for this case study, was the launch of the "I'm lovin' it" campaign on 29 September 2003. The theme and attitude of this full-scale campaign is being integrated into every aspect of the business, from crew training and the overall restaurant experience to national sponsorships, promotions, television, Internet, merchandising and new local street marketing. This is a campaign in which the Internet is a fully integrated marketing communication channel. The new brand and creative direction will be the strategic glue for world-wide marketing and advertising campaigns. In going forward, creative teams working on McDonald's business throughout the world will execute the creative direction, including style, musical approach and theme-line in their own markets.

Central to the US brand campaign, which is seen as a new way of "connecting with our customers" and seeks to "rekindle the emotional bond our customers have with McDonald's through a campaign that depicts how people believe, what they love about life and what they love about McDonald's", are:

- A new "I'm lovin' it" commercial focussing on the family and Ronald McDonald.
- A first ever execution of the "I'm lovin' it" theme in a new product spot.
- Musical talent (including Justin Timberlake, The Clipse, and The Neptunes).
- An exclusive partnership with professional skateboarders Tony Hawk.
- Unique grassroots activities such as "I'm lovin' it" swat teams across the country at sports and high profile events.

This new campaign seeks to reinforce the traditional brand values of McDonald's, such as fun, family, community and social responsibility. It retains and builds on the traditional brand logo, colours and other representation. This case study commences with an analysis of the way in which the various elements of the www.McDonalds.co.uk Web site are used to reinforce brand message, image and identity. It then moves on to explore the broader branding strategy themes of glocalisation, community and channel integration.

Web site elements

Web pages do not allow much scope for communicating messages as well as information about an organisation, and how to start navigating a site. Not only is the overall screen size for a home page relatively limited, but also Web pages need to be designed to accommodate the different generations of technology that might be available to individual users. The answer is to enlist all of the components of the Web site in marketing communication, as discussed below, and to make the brand message integral, rather than an add-on. Analysing the www.mcdonalds.co.uk Web site all of the following

elements of the Web site are marshalled to communicate the overall brand message of a fun experience:

- *Logo.* The golden arches logo, with the "I'm lovin' it" banner underlining the arches appears relatively discretely on the home page, and in the same position on every other page. It is ever present, but takes a back seat. Some of the graphics relating to specific products also show the logo again.

- *Graphics.* Graphics includes pictures, logos, and other images are a visual representation of brand values. McDonald's Web site is packed with graphics. There are inviting pictures of menu items that echo the images on display in menus in the restaurants, thereby reminding the visitor of previous visits, and inviting a revisit. Animation of images gives a sense of movement and dynamism; McDonald's makes judicious use of animation. On the home page, a menu showing three of the products in their range at a time, slowly clicks up the screen, like a moving bill board. Messages are clearly associated with other movements. When the cursor is moved over the football icon, the footballer kicks the ball, and when the cursor is moved over the community icon, a small person passes through the door. When the McChicken Premiere was first launched it was presented on the Web site though a "film trailer". This week, "Big Tasty" has a series of slide displays leading into the still image. Overall, however, movement is used selectively, and most of the screens are relatively still; too much movement can be irritating.

- *Text and copy.* Text and copy sets the tone of voice, and determines whether a message is intelligent, comprehensible and relevant. Text helps to define the brand's personality, and to reinforce brand values consistently. Text is the site talking to the customer; the words determine what is said; the typeface determines the style of the communication. The McDonald's Web site adopts a mixture of promotion and information provision. Information provision is typically signalled by the use of black text on a white background, while promotional text, such as the names of products or prices is often larger and shown in one of a number of colours. For example, the online menu "The Main Menu" provides information, but in a style designed to promote and encourage desire. A rather differently presented feature is the Ingredients list. The Ingredients list is in a new window with small black text on a white background. This lends authority to the information, and makes the text look like printed text.

  Type face is also carefully selected; a corporate modern typeface is used for most of the promotional text and the Web site menu option labels. Variations in type size are used to attract attention. The Kids Zone has much more funky "Word Art" type text, coupled with more movement than elsewhere on the site. Much of the text is clear, one or two word labels, but occasional invitations to engage such as "Did you

know?" are used to draw the surfer in to the dialogue. "Apologies if it's a bit wonky; that's what you get for using chicken breast fillets" injects some light humour. As well as communicating a welcome to users, and inviting them into the site, text needs to echo the thoughts that the user brings to the site.

- *Currency and news*. Currency is important. It communicates a live and dynamic Web site, an organisation that is interested in ensuring that users have access to the latest information. Users need new information to encourage them to revisit. Currency is conveyed through the McDonald's Web site through new product promotions, and changes to the promotion of specific products. "Season's eating's" on the Terry's chocolate orange McFlurry advert is a low key, and culturally neutral way of acknowledging the approach of Christmas, and New Year.

- *Colour*. Arguably the strongest reminder of the brand is in the colour of the background to the site. The MacDonald's bright "fun loving" red acts as a frame for all other images on the Web site. In addition, the Web site makes generous use of bright, even garish primary colours. The golden arches yellow and the burger "orange" appear frequently, but so do green, purple, blue and pink. The Web site framing uses blocks of colour and menus are typically displayed in bright green, yellow or orange. Products designed for children, such as the New Fruity are treated to even more garish blocks of colour, whereas products designed for a more sophisticated audience, such as the new pasta salads, are presented in white and subtle pastels.

- *Shapes*. What do shapes say? Shapes are used in many ways on Web sites, including: shapes of pictures or graphics, shapes of buttons, and shapes of menu option displays. Even small features such as round corners on menu boxes, instead of square corners may communicate a difference of style and approach to service. The choice of typeface and its consistency with other shapes is also an important feature. The golden arches can be seen to be echoed in the shape of a red heart on one the pages dealing with the community involvement. Food products are typically shown in rectangular boxes, but some of the box may be colour blocked, and the edge of the colour blocking is typically curved.

- *Layout and combination of images*. The overall layout of a Web page can be used as a metaphor. The metaphor of a game, with dials and buttons to press is used in the Kids Zone. Elsewhere the metaphor of "menu" is used quite widely.

- *Wallpapers and screen savers*. These are featured in the "I'm lovin' it" campaign. These can be downloaded, and can provide customers with an ever-present reminder of Big M.

Glocalisation

Web sites are globally accessible; the Internet has made world-wide branding possible, and indeed, whatever targeting marketers may intend for an online brand, the Web site will be seen by other audiences. Language, symbols and colours often do not translate across different countries and culture. Branding may be world wide, but preferences are local. Global brands have sought to identify with values that are common to many communities such as safety, style and status and service, but these need to be represented in different ways in different national contexts McDonald's maintains a Web site for each of the countries in which it operates. These are listed on the corporate Web site, www. McDonalds.com The corporate Web site is less focussed on specific products than country Web sites, and tends instead to emphasise corporate statements and policies such as people promise, franchising, investors, social responsibility, careers, and Ronald McDonald House Charities (RMHC). Most of these themes are re-echoed through country Web sites, but the detail and design differs.

Comparisons were conducted between www.mcdonalds.com.au, www. mcdonalds.co.uk and www.mcdonalds.com.hk Comparing the Australian Web site with the one for the UK, the key menu options on the site have much in common:

- The Australian Web site has as main menu items: Our food, What's new, Inside McDonald's, Community, Restaurant locator, and Contact us.
- The UK Web site had as main menu items: Kids Zone, Football, Our Food, Mc Choice, New Tasks, Community, Offers and Mac.

On the Australian site football is replaced with images of body boarders on their way to the beach. In response to national concerns that 50 per cent of Australians do not eat breakfast prominence is given to the launch of an extended breakfast menu. Burger promotion refers to Australian beef, whereas, presumably UK customers are disinterested in the origins of their beef? Also the Australian Web site offers more data on food sensitivities than are available through the UK Web site. A visit to McDonald's Hong Kong Web site www.mcdonalds.com.hk reveals the very blatant differences, of language, ethnicity of people in pictures, and prices in HK$. Also, other parts of the Web site, such as the Career people philosophy, has a "Far Eastern" tinge. Not surprisingly the use of the yellow, orange and red as dominant colours and the golden arch logo underlined by "I'm lovin' it" at around the same size appears on all sites, and acts as the branding glue.

Community

There are two reasons why the concept of community is an interesting aspect of McDonald's online presence:

(1) The way in which the Web site is used to promote and communicate McDonald's values around community involvement and environmental and social responsibility.

(2) The creation of online communities associated with the brand:

> One of McDonald's most important principles has always been to support the communities in which it operates. McDonald's restaurants are, by their nature sociable places, intrinsically linked to local community life (www.mcdonalds.co.uk).

Identification with community is at the core of McDonald's value set. McDonald's embraces the concept of corporate citizenship and social responsibility, and seeks to engage with local communities and to be environmentally responsible in relation to the processes associated with its products. This is communicated through the Web site through providing information about McDonald's community activities, and also through the opportunities that the Web site offers to engage with communities associated with loyalty schemes. The Web sites contain information about the Ronald McDonald Children's Charities (RMCC) which provides accommodation, fundraising, and special needs grants in support of children's causes. The Football section on the UK Web site gives details of how McDonald's is boosting grassroots football over the next four years by funding through partnerships with all four of the UK's leading football bodies. The McDonald's Advantage Club, details of which can be located on the Web site, offers a newsletter, special events, and prize draws. The UK Web site also carries an announcement of the recovery card that gives special offers to students.

Environmental messages are communicated through information on the provenance of ingredients. For example, the Web site assures customers that "the welfare of our chickens is always a priority". Attention is drawn to McDonald's achievement of the Good Egg Award from the British Free Range Egg Producer's Association; this award acknowledges McDonald's commitment to animal welfare. All of the eggs used in McDonald's breakfasts are free range.

Virtual or online communities are viewed as one of the essential components of successful Web presence (Hagel, 1999). Community makes it possible for businesses to collect and leverage knowledge about their customer base (Rowley, 2001, Kannan *et al.*, 2001). Kozinets (1998) identifies a specific type of online community, which is relevant to the present case: virtual communities of consumption. McDonald's have focussed their online community building on communities for children. Two different initiatives are worthy of note:

(1) On the Australian Web site there is a Happy Meal Web site. The Happy Meal Web site seeks to offer a "safe haven" where parents feel confident in the security of the content. Offensive language can be blocked by keyword filters. Content was developed around the concept of "edutainment". The site offers children word, number, name, colour and sound games, and requires that children gain parental permission

before they interact. The database of users is growing at an average of 7 per cent per month with new games added every month (www.tribalddb. com.au/casestudies/McHappyMeal.asp).

(2) At www.MacDonalds.co.uk there is a Kids Zone. This includes details of the latest happy meal, e-cards, online games, and a paint box. The Web site makes use of bright colours, and large easy to read writing.

Channel integration

The earlier click v. brick debate has now been replaced by a recognition that businesses need to take a new look their channel strategies, and to understand both the service and the marketing communication that customers want delivered through each channel, and to develop a robust multi-channel strategy. (Kotler, 2003).

McDonald's in Australia have been involved in a number of campaigns that make innovative use of parallel channels, and that seek to drive audiences from one channel to another, and thereby enhance the intensity of interaction with the brand. These campaigns include the following:

- www.rockybeach.com was created as an online extension to the new Big Mac television promotion. Television viewers were driven to the Web site. To develop a strong online community and encourage repeat visits, the site provided a real time community channel to the Big Mac television commercial characters, Josh, Dave, Jesse, Buzz, and Sandy. The content of the site was constructed to appear alive and provide real-time community features. It also incorporated a weekly newsletter, and an interactive online game based on the site characters where registered users could play for a range of prizes such as: mobile phones, CDs, movie passes, clothes and body boards.

- The "Cool Train" campaign launched in Australia in 2003 was designed to communicate the New Tastes Menu range in a way that was visually engaging and encouraged viewers to actively interact with the brand. A television commercial featured a covert phone number on a fast moving train. Viewers could then SMS or phone to get further information; they were then directed to unlock a secret Web site from which participants could apply for the opportunity to feature in a future McDonald's television commercial. Final candidates were selected and featured in the April "Ragin Cajun" Burger TV campaign. The TV campaign was further supported by Nova FM, who actively promoted "Cool Train" on air. This combination of channels, including television, radio, SMS and the Web created a new type of brand interaction opportunity.

- The Whereisbob? Campaign also made effective use of integrated channels, to build brand engagement, and online community. The campaign was designed to drive awareness and sales of the new

McDonald's Summer Event, which included the Beach Burger and Hotcakes with new Blueberry Sauce. Television advertisements, featuring the URL, introduced the Bob character getting lost on a beach with a Beach Burger. By going online and finding Bob on a virtual beach, viewers/players were entitled to a free desert voucher for each beach burger meal purchased. Tactically the game had to be easy enough to allow users to find Bob without losing interest, but sticky enough to reinforce the brand message. The target market, 16-24 year olds are the heaviest users of the Internet. All of the opt-in participants for the earlier Rocky Beach campaign (21,000 people) were e-mailed invitations to take part. More than 20,000 new players spent an average of seven minutes at the site (www.tribalddb.com.au/news/whereisbob_roi.asp).

· The first of a planned series of McDonald's Internet cafés opened in Melbourne recently with 11 terminals at which café customers can surf the net, e-mail, and deal with business documents. Aimed at the student/travellers marker, customers can purchase cards for $2/4/6 allowing them 20/40/60 minutes of Internet access. The consumer interface, including login, screensaver, help and desktop is available in English, German, Japanese and Mandarin.

Conclusion

Online branding is at an interesting point of development. Many organisations recognise the need for integrated marketing communications across offline and online channels. This makes it difficult to differentiate, both practically and theoretically, between online and offline branding. On the other hand, branding in online environments poses a sufficient range of challenges and opportunities that it is important to shine the spotlight on branding in digital environments, and to explore some of the potential impacts of online channels for branding strategy.

This case study analyses aspects of the online branding approach for a significant global brand. For McDonald's, the online channel is strictly a marketing communications channel with delivery through restaurants. The online channel is therefore enlisted to reinforce brand messages, and relationships. Key aspects of the strategic value set, such as engagement with local community are promoted through Web sites. Integration of online branding has been further promoted by specific campaigns that drive customers between channels. Businesses need to develop integrated brand strategies. Brand presence and experience in the virtual world must mirror presence and experience in the real world, but also add value, or another dimension to the overall brand experience.

Further research into the arena of online branding will be of potential interest to both academics and practitioners. The question at the centre of future research has to be: "How can online branding help to raise awareness

and promote customer relationships and identification with the brand?". This core question might splinter into a number of sub-questions, such as:

- Is online branding only concerned with rational and cognitive aspects of brand engagement, or can it also facilitate and promote emotional and affinitive brand engagement?

- What is the difference in the role and impact of online branding, between those businesses that are using the Internet solely for marketing communications, and those businesses that are using the Internet for both marketing communication and service delivery?

- Which audiences are most amenable to incentives designed to drive them between channels, and thereby enhance their interaction with the brand?

- In what ways are online communities representative of a brand's total customer community?

- What is the stability of online communities and audiences, and how can stability of such communities be enhanced?

References

Eisenhardt, K.M. (1989), "Building theories from case study research", *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 14 No. 4, pp. 532-50.

Hagel, J. (1999), "Net gain: expanding markets through virtual communities", *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, Vol. 13 No. 1, pp. 55-65.

Kannan, P.K., Chang, A.-M. and Whinston, A.B. (2001), "E-business and the intermediary role of virtual communities", in Barnes, S. and Hunt, B. (Eds), *E-commerce and V-business: Business Models for Global Success*, Butterworth Heinemann, Oxford, pp. 67-82.

Kotler, P. (2003), *Marketing Management*, 11th ed., Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ.

Kozinets, R. (1998), "On netography; initial reflections on consumer research investigations of cyberculture", in Alba, J. and Hutchinson, W. (Eds), *Advances in Consumer Research*, Vol. 25, Association for Consumer Research, Provo, UT, pp. 366-71.

Rowley, J. (2001), "Online communities: stabilising e-business", *Global Business & Economics Review*, Vol. 3 No. 1, pp. 84-93.

Rowley, J. (2002), "Using case studies in research", *Management Research News*, Vol. 23 No. 5/6, pp. 20-7.

Sterne, J. (1999), *World Wide Web Marketing*, 2nd ed., Wiley, New York, NY.

Ward, M. and Lee, M. (2000), "Internet shopping, consumer search and product branding", *Journal of Product and Brand Management*, Vol. 9 No. 1, pp. 6-20.

Yin, R.K. (1994), *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, 2nd ed., Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.

Further reading

Leitch, S. and Richardson, N. (2003), "Corporate branding in the new economy", *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 37 No. 7/8, pp. 1065-800.

Ties, A. and Ries, L. (2000), *The 11 Immutable Laws of Internet Branding*, HarperCollins Business, London.

This article has been cited by:

1. Emma Björner. 2013. International positioning through online city branding: the case of Chengdu. *Journal of Place Management and Development* **6**:3, 203-226. [Abstract] [Full Text] [PDF]

2. Ziwei Luo, Haiying WeiAn empirical study on the formation mechanism of internet brand equity 109-112. [CrossRef]

3. Helen Kelly-HolmesLanguages and Global Marketing 475-492. [CrossRef]

4. Liyin Jin. 2009. Dimensions and determinants of website brand equity: From the perspective of website contents. *Frontiers of Business Research in China* **3**, 514-542. [CrossRef]

5. Jennifer Rowley. 2009. Online branding strategies of UK fashion retailers. *Internet Research* **19**:3, 348-369. [Abstract] [Full Text] [PDF]

6. Melodena Stephens Balakrishnan. 2009. Strategic branding of destinations: a framework. *European Journal of Marketing* **43**:5/6, 611-629. [Abstract] [Full Text] [PDF]

7. Rashad Yazdanifard, Arash Najmaei, Zahra SadeghinejadCrafting Excellent I-Brands by Rendering an Intensive Internet Marketing Mix 527-535. [CrossRef]

8. Jennifer Rowley. 2006. An analysis of the e-service literature: towards a research agenda. *Internet Research* **16**:3, 339-359. [Abstract] [Full Text] [PDF]

9. 2005. McDonald's are "lovin' it". *Strategic Direction* **21**:6, 21-23. [Abstract] [Full Text] [PDF]

10. Jennifer Rowley, David BirdOnline Branding 122-142. [CrossRef]