Brand Mantras: Rationale, Criteria and Examples

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In this paper, we consider how marketing managers can benefit from the concept of a "brand mantra." We examine how brand mantras relate to brand positioning and a related concept, "core brand associations." Our focus is on how brand mantras can be used to improve internal brand management. We consider design and implementation issues in term of characteristics of good brand mantras as well as process issues in developing brand mantras. It is noted that brand mantras, as with Nike's "authentic athletic performance" and Disney's "fun family entertainment" often consist of three words that combine brand functions with descriptive and emotional modifiers. Procedurally, brand mantras are developed at the same time as brand positioning. At that time, brand mantras would then be judged on their ability to effectively communicate, simplify, and inspire, as reflected by employee research.

Organizational Brand Management Through Brand Mantras

Introduction

An increasing number of firms have embraced branding as a business priority and marketing imperative. Despite that fact, many firms are unsure as to exactly what they should *do* to effectively manage their brands and maximize their equity. Much of the branding literature has taken an *external* perspective to focus on strategies and tactics that firms should take to build or manage brand equity with customers. Without question, at the heart of all marketing activity should be the positioning of a brand and the "essence" of its meaning with consumers. In terms of strategic and tactical importance, properly positioning a brand is essential to creating a strong brand.

Equally important, however, is "positioning the brand internally," i.e., the manner by which the brand positioning is explained and communicated internally. With service companies especially, an up-to-date and deep understanding of the brand by virtually all employees is critical. Relatively little research, however, has taken an *internal* perspective to consider what steps firms should take to be sure their employees and marketing partners appreciate and understand basic branding notions, and how they can impact and help – or hurt – the equity of their particular brands.

In this paper, we consider how marketing managers can benefit from the

concept of a "brand mantra." We examine how brand mantras relate to brand positioning and a related concept, "core brand associations." Our focus is on how brand mantras can be used to improve internal brand management. The paper is organized as follows. After briefly reviewing brand positioning, we define the brand mantra concept and consider how it should be designed and implemented. In the process, we apply some of this discussion to well-developed brand mantras for two highly successful brands, Nike and Disney. The paper concludes by considering next steps in the use and study of brand mantras.

Brand Positioning

There are a number of issues that arise in deciding what should be the essence of a brand and arriving at its positioning that are beyond the scope of this paper (see Collins and Porras 1994; Keller 1998; Macrae 1996). In a nutshell, *brand positioning* is all about creating the optimal location in the minds of existing and potential customers so that they think of the brand in the "right way." Brand positioning requires thoughtful analysis of competitors and consumers to determine the desired image for the brand to maximize its chances for success. Although a number of different approaches and methodologies for positioning are possible, they all typically define the nature of the target market and relevant competitors and the means by which the brand should be seen as similar as well as distinct from those competitors.

A closely related – but distinct – concept is core brand associations. *Core brand associations* are those consumer-derived associations that reflect the brand positioning. In other words, core brand associations are those brand associations in the minds of consumers that are created or reinforced as a result of the firms' marketing activity to convey the desired positioning. The effectiveness of the marketing programme will be the extent to which strong, favourable, and unique brand associations are created as a result of consumer experiences with the marketing programme that reflect the intended positioning.

In other words, if asked for their associations to the brand, consumers should *not* be expected to state associations that are literally consistent with the brand positioning. Rather, they should be expected to elicit associations that *implicitly* capture that meaning. For example, consumers are unlikely to state "authentic athletic performance" when asked about Nike, but they would be expected to state associations that are consistent with this brand mantra and the corresponding positioning, e.g., "top athletes," "Michael Jordan," "innovative technology," "Air cushioning," "competition," etc.

Core brand associations may be tangible or intangible attributes or benefits, experiences, images – anything that can be stored in memory and linked to the brand that reflects its brand positioning. Core brand associations are important to define so that efforts to measure brand equity, e.g., through brand tracking, are pointed in the right direction and able to tap into consumer brand meaning in a relevant way. Core brand associations may also help to suggest the proper language and phrasing to be used for the brand internally within the

organization.

Regardless of which particular positioning is adopted or which core brand associations are defined, a number of steps must be taken to ensure that marketing activities and the marketing programme that is developed accurately reflect the intent of the positioning. The positioning decision is typically made by only a handful or subset of the many different people within the organization whose words and actions could potentially impact the destiny of brands in a noticeable or even appreciable fashion. We next turn to one communication device to facilitate how pervasively the organization adopts brand positioning concepts and therefore effectively manages brand equity.

Brand Mantras

Brand mantras are short three to five word phrases that capture the irrefutable essence or spirit of the brand positioning. Their purpose is to ensure that all employees within the organization as well as external marketing partners understand what the brand most fundamentally is to represent with consumers so that they can adjust their actions accordingly. Brand mantras can provide guidance as to what products to introduce under the brand, what ad campaigns to run, where and how the brand should be sold, and so on. The influence of brand mantras, however, can extend beyond these tactical concerns. Brand mantras may even guide the most seemingly unrelated or mundane decisions such as the look of a reception area, the way phones are answered, and so on. In effect, brand mantras are designed to create a mental filter to screen out "brand-inappropriate" marketing activities or actions of any type that may have a bearing on customers' impressions of a brand.

Brand mantras are important for a number of reasons. First, any time a consumer or customer encounters a brand – in any way, shape, or form – their knowledge about that brand may change, and as a result, the equity of the brand is impacted. Given that a vast number of employees, either directly or indirectly, come into contact with consumers in a way that may affect consumer knowledge about the brand, it is important that their words and actions consistently reinforce and support the brand meaning. Many employees or marketing partners (e.g., ad agency members) who potentially could help or hurt brand equity may be far removed from the marketing strategy formulation and may not even recognize their role in impacting equity. The existence and communication of a brand mantra signals the importance to the organization of the brand and an understanding of its meaning as well as the crucial role of employees and marketing partners in its management. It also provides memorable short-hand as to what are the crucial considerations of the brand that should be kept most salient and top-of-mind.

Examples of Brand Mantras

What makes for a good brand mantra? Two high profile and successful examples of brand mantras come from two powerful brands, Nike and Disney, as

follows.

Nike. A brand with a keen sense of what it represents to consumers is Nike. Nike has a rich set of associations with consumers, revolving around such considerations as their innovative product designs, their sponsorships of top athletes, their award-winning advertising, their competitive drive, and their irreverent attitude. Internally, Nike marketers adopted a three-word brand mantra of "authentic athletic performance" to guide their marketing efforts. Thus, in Nike's eyes, their entire marketing programme – their products and how they are sold – must reflect those key brand values conveyed by the brand mantra.

Nike's brand mantra has had profound implications for their marketing. In the words of ex-Nike marketing gurus Scott Bedbury and Jerome Conlon who believe that brand mantras provide the intellectual "guard rails" to keep the brand moving in the right direction and to make sure it does not get off track somehow. From a product development standpoint, Nike's brand mantra has affected where they have taken the brand. Over the years, Nike has expanded its brand meaning from "running shoes" to "athletic shoes" to "athletic shoes and apparel" to "all things associated with athletics (including equipment)." Each step of the way, however, they have been guided by their "authentic athletic performance" brand mantra. For example, as Nike rolled out their successful apparel line, one important hurdle for the products was that they could be made innovative enough to truly benefit top athletes. At the same time, they have been careful to avoid using the Nike name to brand products that do not fit with their brand mantra (e.g., casual shoes).

When Nike has experienced problems with their marketing programme, it has often been a result of their failure to figure out how to translate their brand mantra to the marketing challenge at hand. For example, in going to Europe, Nike experienced several false starts until realizing that "authentic athletic performance" has a different meaning over there and, in particular, has to involve soccer in a major way, among other things. Similarly, Nike stumbled in developing their All Conditions Gear (ACG) outdoors shoes and clothing sub-brand in translating their brand mantra into a less competitive arena.

Disney. Disney's development of their brand mantra was in response to their incredible growth through licensing and product development during the mid-1980's. In the late 1980's, Disney became concerned that some of its characters (Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, etc.) were being used inappropriately and becoming overexposed. To investigate the severity of the problem, Disney undertook an extensive brand audit. As part of a brand inventory, they first compiled a list of all Disney products that were available (licensed and company manufactured) and all third-party promotions (complete with point-of-purchase displays and relevant merchandising) from stores across the country and all over the world. At the same time, Disney also launched a major consumer research study – a brand exploratory – to investigate how consumers felt about the Disney

brand.

The results of the brand inventory revealed some potentially serious problems: The Disney characters were on so many products and marketed in so many ways that in some cases it was difficult to discern what could have been the rationale behind the deal to start with. The consumer study only heightened Disney's concerns. Because of the broad exposure of the characters in the marketplace, many consumers had begun to feel that Disney was exploiting its name. In some cases, consumers felt that the characters added little value to products and, worse yet, involved children in purchase decisions that they would typically ignore.

Because of their aggressive marketing efforts, Disney had written contracts with many of the "park participants" for co-promotions or licensing arrangements. Disney characters were selling everything from diapers to cars to McDonald's hamburgers. Disney learned in the consumer study, however, that consumers did not differentiate between all of the product endorsements. "Disney was Disney" to consumers, whether they saw the characters in films, records, theme parks, consumer products, etc. Consequently, *all* products and services that used the Disney name or characters had an impact on Disney's brand equity. Consumers reported that they resented some of these endorsements because they felt that they had a special, personal relationship with the characters and with Disney that should not be handled so carelessly.

As a result of their brand audit, Disney moved quickly to establish a brand equity team to better manage the brand franchise and more carefully evaluate licensing and other third party promotional opportunities. One of the mandates of this team was to ensure that a consistent image for Disney – reinforcing their key brand associations – was conveyed by all third party products and services. To facilitate this supervision, Disney adopted an internal brand mantra of "fun family entertainment" to serve as a screen for proposed ventures. Opportunities that were presented that were not consistent with the brand mantra – no matter how appealing – were rejected. For example, Disney was approached to co-brand a mutual fund in Europe that was designed for families as a way for parents to save for the college expenses of their children. The opportunity was declined despite the consistent "family" association because Disney believed that a connection with the financial community or banking suggested other associations that were inconsistent with their brand image (mutual funds are rarely intended to be entertaining!).

Designing a Brand Mantra

Brand mantras must economically communicate what the brand is and what the brand is not. The Nike and Disney examples show the power and utility of having a well-designed brand mantra. They also help to suggest what might characterize a good brand mantra. Both examples are essentially structured the same way with three words as follows:

	Emotional Modifier	*Descriptive Modifier*	*Brand Functions*
Nike	*Authentic*	*Athletic*	*Performance*
Disney	*Fun*	*Family*	*Entertainment*

These brand mantras can be broken down into three terms. The *Brand Functions* term describes the nature of the product or service and/or type of experiences or benefits that the brand provides. This may range from very concrete, where the term just reflects the product category itself, to more abstract notions, as with Nike and Disney, where the term relates to higher order experiences or benefits that may be delivered by a variety of different products. The *Descriptive Modifier* is a way to circumscribe the business functions term to further clarify its nature. Thus, Nike's performance is not just any kind (e.g., not artistic performance) but only *athletic* performance; Disney's entertainment is not just any kind (e.g., not musical entertainment) but only *family* entertainment. Combined, the business activity and descriptive modifier help to delineate the brand boundaries. Finally, the *Emotional Modifier* provides another qualifier in terms of how the brand delivers these benefits. In other words, what is the qualitative nature of what the brand does? How exactly does it provide benefits and in what way? This term provides further delineation and clarification.

Several additional points about brand mantras are worth noting. First, brand mantras derive their power and usefulness in their collective meaning. Other brands may be strong on one, or perhaps even a few of the brand associations making up the brand mantra. For the brand mantra to be effective, *no other brand should singularly excel on all three dimensions*. That is, part of the key to both Nike and Disney's success is that for years, no other competitor could really deliver on the promise suggested by their brand mantra as well as those brands. Second, brand mantras typically are designed to capture the brand's points-of-difference, i.e., what is unique about the brand. Other aspects of the brand positioning – especially the brand's points-of-parity – may also be important and may need to be reinforced in other ways.

Implementing a Brand Mantra

Brand mantras should be developed at the same time as the brand positioning. Brand positioning typically is a result of an in-depth examination of the brand through some form of brand audit or other activities. Brand mantras may benefit from the learning from those activities but, at the same time, also require more internal examination and involve input from a wider range of company employees and marketing staff. Part of this internal exercise is actually to determine the different means by which each and every employee currently impacts brand equity and how he or she can contribute in a positive way to a brand's destiny.

Procedurally, the brand positioning can often be summarized in a few sentences or a short paragraph that suggests the ideal core brand associations for the brand to be held by consumers. Based on these associations, a "brain

storming session" can attempt to identify different possible combinations of words as brand mantra candidates. To arrive at the final brand mantra, the following considerations should come into play.

Criteria for effective brand mantras. There are a number of characteristics that would seem to distinguish brand mantras. Ideally, a brand mantra would do the following.

Communicate. A good brand mantra should define the category (or categories) of business for the brand and set the brand boundaries. It should also clarify what is unique about the brand.

Simplify. An effective brand mantra should be memorable. As a result, it should be short, crisp, and vivid in meaning. In many ways, a three word mantra is ideal as it is the most economical way to convey the brand positioning. There are times, however, where more words – in the form of clarifying the business functions or the nature of the modifiers – may be necessary. Regardless of exactly how many words actually make up the mantra, however, *there will always be a level of meaning beneath the brand mantra itself that will need to be articulated.* Virtually any word is inherently ambiguous enough that multiple interpretations are possible. Consequently, it becomes important to explain in greater detail just what is meant by each word or term in the mantra. For example, "fun," "family," and "entertainment" in Disney's brand mantra could each take on multiple meanings such that Disney felt the need to drill deeper with the mantra to provide a stronger foundation. Two or three short phrases were therefore added to clarify each of the three words.

Inspire. Ideally, the brand mantra would also stake out ground that is personally meaningful and relevant to as many employees as possible. Brand mantras can do more than inform and guide but also inspire if the brand values tap into higher-level meaning with employees as well as consumers.
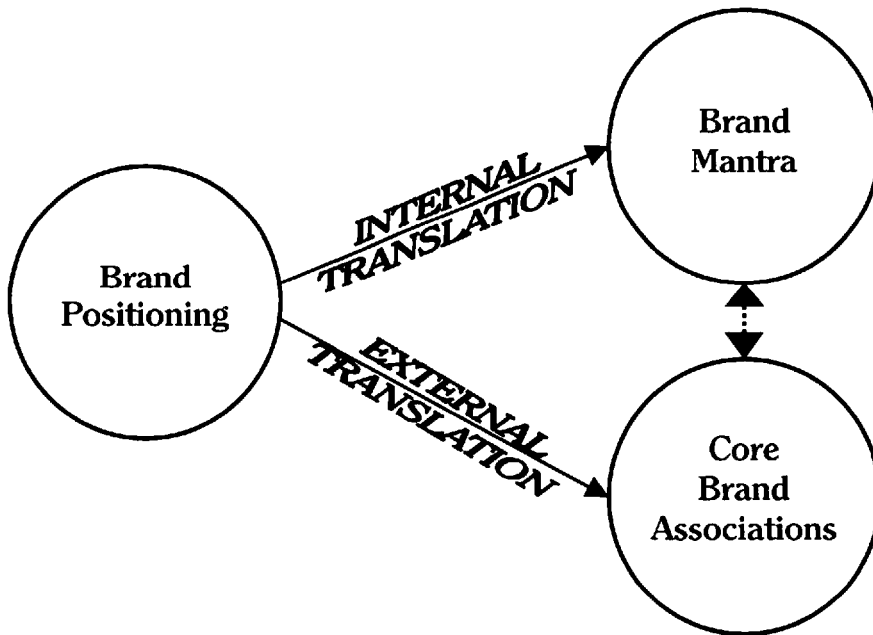
Summary and Discussion

The purpose of this paper was to address how the strategic positioning of brands should be communicated within the organization. The premise is that although much thought goes into competitive and consumer analysis to arrive at the best possible positioning, relatively little attention has been paid as to what are steps that need to be made internally to make sure that members of the organization have a proper understanding of the brand and how it should be treated. Two important concepts were identified (see Figure 1).

The *brand mantra* is a short 3-5 word expression of the brand positioning designed to capture and convey the meaning of the most important aspect of its positioning. *Core brand associations* are those brand associations that marketers want consumers to hold about the brand in memory that represent the most important aspects of its positioning. In other words, brand mantras and core brand associations can be thought of as "translations" of abstract brand

positioning notions to facilitate brand management: Brand mantras are internal (to the organization) translations of brand positioning designed to simplify and communicate positionings to facilitate employee understanding; core brand associations are external translations of brand positioning designed to reflect consumer understanding.

Figure 1. Defining, Conveying and Capturing Brand Meaning

The paper concentrated on brand mantras and considered design and implementation issues in term of characteristics of good brand mantras as well as process issues in developing brand mantras. It was noted that brand mantras, as with Nike's "authentic athletic performance" and Disney's "fun family entertainment" often consist of three words that combined brand functions with descriptive and emotional modifiers. Procedurally, brand mantras are developed at the same time as brand positioning. At that time, brand mantras would then be judged on their ability to effectively communicate, simplify, and inspire, as reflected by employee research.

Additional research should explore other facets of brand mantras. This investigation should be pursued at two levels. At the higher or more strategic level, broader issues as to the best organizational structure and processes to optimize brand equity (and profits) need to be defined. Of particular interest, as suggested by this paper, is how to empower employees so that they can add value and equity to brands. Certainly one aspect of that transformation will involve communications, and brand mantras were put forth as one possible means of conveying the most essential ingredients of the brand meaning.

At the more tactical level, the role and scope of brand mantras need to be

defined, and more detailed guidelines for design and implementation must be established. Some practical issues include the following. Are there limits to the number of words with a brand mantra? Certainly a popular belief is that many corporate mission statements are ignored because they are too long, too bland, and just too easy to ignore. For brand mantras to be used, they must be memorable. At the same time, if they are too short and not well-constructed, brand mantras may come across as too vague such that they are easily abused by idiosyncratic, subjective interpretations. How should brand mantras be constructed? Are the Nike and Disney examples representative?

In conclusion, as recognition of the importance of brands grows and as brand management practices evolve, new marketing concepts and frameworks must be developed. Brand mantras represent another addition to the marketing tool kit to help in that pursuit.

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