

Branding vs. Value Creation

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Companies differ in their approaches towards brand management practices as it has various dimensions and is done through several ways. This article attempts to explore and expose all those brand management practices, which cannot be considered as ethical and effective. Read on to know why various brand management approaches are actually daylight robberies and understand the correct approach towards brand management.

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There were ruthless salesmen, who were clear about what they wanted without regard about how the customer would benefit by it. The others, the “daylight robbers”, could be more ruthless: They didn’t care about the harm it could cause.

In a commercial, a small child wearing thick glasses stands outside a TV shop, surreptitiously watching TV. The music and setting is very gloomy. His mother worrying about his not having arrived back home looks desperately for him around the town. When she finally finds him, both of them hug and cry, in relief. The advertisement conveys the gloomy life of the child, as he cannot watch TV at home because of poor eyesight. The first-time viewer is left confused. In a country—India— where a vast number of people go to sleep hungry, you expect this to be a social welfare related advertisement of Unesco or some such agency, or at best of an insurance company. This advertisement claims that their so-called researchers have designed a picture tube that is safe for the eyes. The way the advertisement concludes almost means as if watching this TV would actually improve eyesight.

A commercial of a cola has a child, who comes home earlier than expected to find his elder siblings having a party in the absence of the parents. As the parents had told them not to party, the kid is offered a bribe of a large bottle of the cola to keep the secret. In a country where corruption is rampant, they not only seem of condone it, but also glorify it in the minds of children.

The top cola companies not only fight with each other in the market place, but have also recently defaced the rocks— by painting their logos on them— in many places along the roads to advertise themselves. This has been done without the permission of the government, or paying for the damages caused to the rocks.

A multinational company recently advertised their new product: Salt. The child in the advertisement is instructed how this salt which has iodine in it is good for the brain. The way the advertisement proceeds, the underlying message is: Eat more salt. This is an extremely unhealthy suggestion.

Almost all small and some mid-sized car manufactures in India have gone on a rampage to show whose car is capable of being driven more rashly. In one case, a psychiatrist gets depressed, hyperactive patient to fast-drive— shown as a release for the patient. The question that arises is: Have they thought about the consequences of depicting such an ad? In other commercials: The advertised car is capable of negotiating through the small spaces left in a traffic jam; if need be, can balance itself on two wheels;

when driven fast can manage to stop within millimeters of a pedestrian. The rash driver is a winner all through and the driver wins the girl. In a country where hardly anyone follows traffic laws, such a practice is being encouraged by the very people who could save lives by discouraging rash driving, and educating the public about safe driving. After all, the car manufacturers, like other product manufacturers, live and breath concepts of what it means to own their products. It is their responsibility to educate the public constructively about the product, and not misguide.

It is not to say that these products are inherently bad. But, tactics used in many of the advertisements to sell their products are based on ideas and values that have nothing to do with the products. Worse, they try to sell to the vulnerable public by manipulating them to do things that are not in their interest, and can seriously harm them. The child might end up over-watching TV, encouraged drivers might drive faster and more ruthlessly, children might feel that asking for bribes is an acceptable thing to do, the hyper-active might relate his or her release to fast driving— seriously endangering lives.

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But at a different dimension, to the customer, who looks deeper— which eventually he or she does— such conduct of suppliers is a reflection of a disease elsewhere in their organizations. A feeling of something-has-to-be-wrong-somewhere comes in as customer relates the lack of values of the company to the products.

Even from a perspective of profit, this kind of brand management is short-sighted. It puts off people when they become aware of the fact that they are being cheated and manipulated.

Brand Management as Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)

Be it an environmentalist, NGO, doctor, or police, the work they do in other areas are not given importance, and any distraction they face is seen as unethical. None of their prestige— brand value— depends on the social work they do apart from their chosen profession. And so, it should be. But there is an “outlaw” organization, that is asked to do things which are not its core competence and hence, is not good at doing. This “outlaw” organizations renounces business. They are supposed to do a lot of social work in the name of CSR, even if they don't like it.

If they, the businesses, had the courage, to sell their products and services on the basis of their real value, they would fight against the distraction that CSR brings. This distraction dilutes the organizational effort to develop and provide top-class product and services. It certainly distorts the communication of the real quality and characteristics of the products. A part of the communication of the companies involved in CSR is certainly about the “social good they do beyond the ‘mere’ profit objectives”.

There are elements in the business who want to sell their products not for the quality they offer, but for an aura of the social good they seem to offer. You, instead of forcing products by manipulating them, want to look goody-goody and then emotionally blackmail clients to buy your products based on reasons that have nothing to do with the products and services *per se*. You can then harm 10 people with dodgy products as long as you help one under CSR. CSR can easily become a proxy for irresponsibility in ensuring that good products and services are provided.

Even if CSR is done responsibly, branding based on CSR does real harm to the morality of the society, and its economic conduct. If CSR based branding does get the products sold, it does it because

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people seem to believe that by buying such products they can fulfill their individual responsibility of doing good to the society. The harm to the morality comes from abdication of individual responsibility, and of the responsibility of governments and NGOs. And in a poor country, how can running schools in a five-star office complex help the poor, in general? Or, how can an airline's sponsoring air travel of blind orphans do good to the poor, in general? If this money were to be used more fruitfully—economically—so much more good could happen. In fact, a more in-depth economical look at such a scenario would suggest that this money spent in the name of CSR causes real harm to the society. Hence, CSR should be dumped.


Brand Management as Values, the Real Responsibility

The above discussion depicts what brand managers can do to sell their products with scant regard what they do. Branding is not about strategy of an individual department, but is the lifestyle of the organization.

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How can the branding, marketing and selling departments manipulate customer, and hope that the operations and researchers are not going to follow the same ethics? Compromises seep in from one part of the organization to the rest, quite insidiously.

Brand management should be based on the product and services. Brand management is first about meeting the expectation, and then exceeding them. It is about educating the clients about the good as well as the bad side of the product, teaching, mentoring and actually being an institution to spread awareness of the product segment among them. And then, if you lose business, so be it.

This means being a step ahead. The supplier ensures that he/she provides the best services that are possible for the client, without much concern for the immediate financial implications. This conduct has a cleansing effect; the supplier puts so much heart into his or her work that the product exceeds the quality expectations. The effects are subtle as clients also end up trusting such suppliers. These are foundations for sustainable, evolving and profitable business practices and real brand management. 

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