Brand perception creates superiority

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Abstract

Creating market segmentation through select communication method to a unique group of people without having to change its physical aspect is what defies product positioning. To create an effective product positioning, marketer needs to decide which image they want to communicate to its targeted audience which is relevant to their perception.

Consumers reserve the right to evaluate and choose intangible benefits than tangible benefits out of a product. Consumers in the end will choose the attributes of what a brand represents rather than just its physical and tangible benefits. Brand perception has capability to create superiority over the competition.

Key words: product positioning, brand, communication

A brand image is how consumers personifies, attach ideas, believes and impression to that particular brand, product and service. Related to time, brand image in a person's mind changes along the societal norm, depending on the cultural situation at the moment. Thus, there are several elements associated to a brand image when a person wants to decide to consume that particular brand and or service. First, the social attribute given to that brand, and finally how important that attribute to that person when they decided to choose the brand.

Brand image is a way how consumers accept a brand (Brad Van Auken: 2004). Consumers have a specific way of giving value to an object, company or products and services it carries. Through imagery, a brand image represents attributes which is highly associated on how consumers perceives its quality and values, which in the end creates a basis of reasoning why they finally choose that particular products and services. This imagery is created as a basis of differentiation between the many brands, products and services available at any given moment to consumers. The imagery is not created in an instant; the audience creates it through continuous understanding of what it represents through time. The understanding of this imagery through constant and consistent message delivery will give a net positive effect. As such, a brand image is not the decided effect from a company or its brand owner, but as a resultant effect created inside the image owner, which are the consumer's minds.

According to Kotler and Armstrong (2013), a good brand builds up character and value proposition. It conveys the character and value propotion with a unique way through strong emotional message. The marketer has to run the art of persuasion effectively, in order to win the heart of audience, and provide audience the orientation toward the brand.

A person has the ability to give meaning to anything they observe. Most of this ability to give meaning is not a learned response but learned through an abstract associative train of thought, which associates signs or brands with other elements. This happens without the need to have a physical interaction with the elements as it happens inside a person's mind. Many automakers have tried to emulate the Germans top brands such as BMW, Mercedes, and Audi to no avail. Lexus, Infiniti, and Acura, respectively, the premium brands of Toyota, Nissan, and Honda never reached the perceived quality of its German rivals. Through sales numbers and perceived brand studies, the Japanese trio never reached the accolades the Germans top brands for more than two decades. Being a German car carries the accolade of engineering heritage back to the early era of industrial revolution, a value of time not available to the Japanese brands where Japanese cars only garner reputation after world war II, five decades after the German brands, and even then Japanese cars are only known for its economic small cars.

Through this association, German cars carry a prestige advantage compared to any existing brand in the world. To the efficiency push mandated by government all over the world, Mercedes creates its first ever front wheel driven car, the CLA, a direct competitor to Honda Accord and Toyota Camry, a mainstream product. Carrying a

price premium over the pedestrian brands, Mercedes CLA is regarded as the best entry-level premium sedan in the United States even though it lost points for being smaller than Honda Accord and Toyota Camry.

The fact that people are willing to pay more for an inferior product is a testament of brand imagery and emotion taking importance than logical thinking. People regard German brands, and in this case, Mercedes has more value than Honda and Toyota.

Stephen W. Littlejohn and Karen A. Foss (2008) describes Charles Osgood measurement of meaning as a way to understand the plethora of audience through messages. Through this measurement of meaning, Osgood develops a semantic differential a way to measure the connotative meaning of observed objects, events and concepts; Osgood is able to define meaning from adjectives.

Osgood also came out with a statistical tool called factor analysis, which lay the foundation for the meaning of brands which establish semantic differential dimensionality. The meaning of projecting an image in a metaphoric space with three main dimensions which are evaluate, activity and potential. A sign, from words, concept or a brand will incite a reaction from a person who sees it depending on their evaluation be it good or bad. Activity, be it active or not and finally, the potential, be it strong or weak.

The connotative meaning relies on a each person's response to each three factors above. The German brands, because of good evaluation from those who gave meaning to them, through the brand activities and their potential to grow to be a strong brand through time. As Kapferer (2008) quotes that brand identity and brand image is a differenty entity. Brand identity is created from the brand owner. While the brand images came from the mind of the brand's audience as the receiver of a message, they filter it through ther cognitive thought process. As such, marketers focus on a small group of meaning which is highly regarded by its intended target audience to maximize the understanding of the brand.

Brand image is a combination of brand identity and other elements, which displays impression, ideas, and opportunity, which is conveyed through message. Message is a transmission of symbols of parts or insight on products, its workers, distribution channel, and communication activity such as advertising (JF Kapferer, 2008). As such, for a good brand to be established by the marketer, an image should be a part of communication process, which takes into account the human or the audience factor to create an unbroken stream of communication to arrive without any disturbance. Be it through verbal, written or through visuals, the symbols need to be consistent across the range.

A symbol can be defined as something, which is used or is observed as a representation of an object. A traffic symbol, consisting of many images, each conveys a particular message compressed into simple images. A red crossed out P letter doesn not just means no parking in the immediate area but it also conveys reasoning why a person cannot park there. Perhaps it is placed after a stop light or in the immediate area of ambulance access. In the end, a symbol represents more than just what can be seen. It is most prevalent in languages, which used symbolic characters such as logogram scripts (Japanese, Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese). In Japanese and Chinese language, the character "木" conveys two similar things, to Japanese it's tree but to Chinese it's wood. It is slightly different but the character conveys a similar meaning, which both national understands. What is more captivating is that, the character represents different meaning derived from the picture. For Japanese, the character looks like a simplified icon of a tree but for the Chinese it's a supporting beam, which in the old days is mainly, wood.

A circle with a three pointed star is a symbol of all cars made by Mercedes Benz, be it a lorry truck, a bus, a delivery car, a sports car, a family car, a family wagon, a limousine, and future concept cars. Out of the definition of luxury, Mercedes lorry truck and delivery cars are far from being luxury. By definition, only around half of Mercedes product line up can be considered a luxury. However, in Indonesia, the mention of Mercedes Benz instantly conjures a luxury brand oriented around sedans and the car of choice of established people. It is however one example of a success brand image projection with a consistent message delivery from Mercedes Benz part. After the Second World War, Mercedes has been consistent in its creation of products, beginning from the W100 series in the 1960s, even the entry level car for Mercedes has been an upscale solution in the market from 50 years ago. Most famous of all, the W123, or lovingly known as the Mercedes Tiger, the precursor to the E-Class is regarded as the best classic car available in the market today, almost 40 years after its sellout date. Through the years, Mercedes also campaigns the brand heavily in prestigious sporting events such as golf, tennis, even fashion shows, cementing its status as a fashion item. The end result of this consistent message delivery and consistent product delivery is a brand image that is strong in luxury which is integral to the

consumer's perception of the brand. More than just a promise, Mercedes successfully delivers a communication through their audience about why the brand deserves a luxury image.

When a brand owner fails to communicate effectively what their brand entails, its beliefs, associations and commitments, then the consumers are left to their own devices when giving meaning to that particular brand. When a brand commits to its image delivery, consumers will follow its development through time. That is why companies are proactively seeking ways to communicate their image through the growth of media or through creative media placement. A brand is formed through subjective association of its viewers, as such; it is hard to rationalize when a brand image is already formed. Mercedes trucks are far from luxury. The Mercedes Econic line of trucks consists of maximum utility function such as garbage truck, fire truck, lorry carrier, and other custom utility use modification. Yet, the mention of Mercedes directly correlated to a premium brand.

The effect of brand image is more visible when being attached to a high risk – high importance product with high price. These type of products are considered an investment not in monetary value but in prestige. A brand image is one way to cement a commitment from consumer to justify an expensive purchase. As it provides an objective point of view to purchase as intangible aspect of the product (the brand) materializes itself as a prestige symbol, increasing the overall value of the product.

There are caveats to brand image such as changes in value through word of mouth. Positive word of mouth creates a further positive attribute to the brand, however a negative word of mouth especially from social leaders might derail the effort of positive communication established by the brand. As such, most if not all automakers embrace the concept of community, whereby select big communities are sometimes under direct care of the brand to maintain good communication and detect any potential problems early on. These communities' falls directly under communication effort to create a consistent effort on projecting a brand image this is beneficial for the brand in the long run. As product becoming more and more streamlined, with increasing competitors coming into the market, consumers are now exposed to more brands all expecting the same business.

As the art of persuasion of brand image created one more specific reason, separated from the benefit of its physical use, a brand has more room to exploit and deliver a reasoning of what to expect from using their solutions compared to the competition. The promise of the brand when properly exposed will create a unique and easier to be remembered by the consumer.

Consumers will consider a brand only when that brand has created a particular association inside their mind. Through brand image, consumers already consider and compare its competing solution from other brands to fasten the buying decision process. Without a strong brand image, consumers will not necessarily remembers a particular brand in their buying decision process remembering also as new brands and new product category created continuously.

Motivation in buying a particular brand is also noted as one of the important element in buying decision process. Motivation to consume differs from one person to another. Mostly it revolves around the importance of consuming said product and service. Those who found a product have low importance, usually sold at cheap price does not particularly demand a high brand image compared to a high importance – high price products such as an automotive product or fashion items. When buying a staple food such as rice in Indonesia, most people put more attention into the end result, the variety of the rice instead of the brand. When buying an automotive brand however, most people sometimes takes days, weeks, even months, identifying all positive and negative attributes of the product.

The first process is to considers all things tangible, and finally to consider the alternative available in the market. The way the consumer weighs in the available options is heavily dependent on the train of thought or their standing with the brand's value. All other alternatives might be tangible, existing as product's competitor, but can also intangible, only exists in the consumer's mind as they are looking for the perfect solution which might not be available in the market.

Brand image are in the eye of its consumer and not from the marketer themselves. Brand image might be incited from the brand owner, but the meaning and the valuation of that image is the resultant effect of thought process from the viewers. Before trying to change or created a brand image inside a consumer's mind, marketers needs to know and understand the though patern and what kind of association the existing brand carries inside the consumer's collective mind. Marketers needs to understand of which attribute is more important and what kind

of association the consumer's have to the brand, be it existing or not. Positive attribute such as size, credibility, stability, social issues, corporate social responsibilities, eco minded, are some of the positive attributes.

Bajaj, a famous motorcycle brand in India failed to gain market share in Indonesia even though they carry a unique product, a motorcycle with two sparkplugs per cylinder to maximize fuel economy and increase power. Not even the market leaders, Honda and Yamaha have a similar line of product, which mimics Bajaj solution. However, Bajaj is always considered as cheap three wheeled public transportation in Indonesia and without targeted image projection towards diminishing this image, Bajaj fails to garner prestige and left out of the market.

Being a social conscious company currently is a positive effect that is being exploited by companies to appeal to social minded people. As such, the Japanese automotive brands reinvents themselves becoming eco centric companies, answering the challenge of alternative fuel and focusing more on fuel economy than outright luxury unlike the German brands. Toyota and Honda becomes the top two automaker from Japan that focus on alternative fuel cars such as hydrogens and hybrids for their lineup. While Toyota pushes on with the Prius hybrid family of cars, Honda tries to electrify their whole line up with hybrid engine offer. Toyota and Honda builds their identity as a company who cares about the environment and a foreward looking company that anticipates where the future technology is going. These brand identities are what is exposed to their audience (Kottler and Keller, 2009).

To deliver this brand identity to their audience, companies position their brands accordingly. Brand positioning is a terminology where a brand tries to adjust the product, brand or service into the consumer's lifestyle. Positioning refers to market segmentation through the use of either or together of two things, creating a product specific to its targeted market and or identify and inform a specific product feature to satisfy the needs of a selected audience.

Creating market segmentation through select communication method to a unique group of people without having to change its physical aspect (Lane, King, Russel:2005). To build an effective positioning, a marketer needs to choose a unique and consistent dimension of attribute. Arriving to a conclusion what image to be projected to a brand's audience involves a thorough research about consumer perception and then selectively choose an effective communication method to maximize consistency of delivery.

Once an image projection has been chose, a brand needs to keep its consistence on delivering the message. It needs constant care and attention; to not let one message went astray. Once a strong message has been repeated consistently, future endeavor will be easier to maintain. Mercedes consistent luxury performance image and BMW consistent performance luxury image stays strong to this day. Established people will choose Mercedes over BMW but aspiring young people will choose BMW over Mercedes. In the end, perception on the brand has capability to create superiority over the competition is very clear, and need to be exposed to come up in near generic market where technical advantage is becoming more diminished especially as technological advancement in production matures overtime.

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