Q&A: Seven Costly Sins of Brand Identity

Following a webinar presented via Warc in 2018, Professor Jenni Romaniuk answers common questions on brand identity.

For more information we recommend Jenni's recently released book **Building Distinctive Brand Assets** (Oxford University Press, 2018). For more information visit: *www.MarketingScience.info/building-distinctive-brand-assets*

Should a brand refresh its brand assets, as in modernise the logo and font e.g. bit-by-bit every five to ten years? If you look at how brand assets of big brands have evolved over decades they're very much the same as they were, but different. For a label change... do you have a rule of thumb for when a change is safe? Example: new label does at least as well as existing.

I have heard a considerable amount of opinion about how often to refresh a brand asset, but seen very little empirical evidence. My concern about refreshment is if done too often it turns what should be a long-term investment similar to a classic suit or black dress into a single season fashion item that needs to be constantly replaced with the next season trends.

If you design with the long-term future in mind, you should not need to update very often. If you do update, quantify the short term branding loss and compensate with stronger direct branding as you build up the refreshed asset. If it is just that the change will result in no loss of branding quality, ask what then is the value of the change? Do you have evidence this change is necessary or are you just doing it because you (or others) feel you should?

With label changes, I refer to changes that directly concern how the brand is communicated on pack. In this instance, why is the new label doing at least as well as existing worth the cost of the label change?

However if the change is motivated by other reasons, eg, a change to ingredients, or a new claim added, then yes, being equivalent to the past is the minimum bar. But I would try to use any change opportunity to improve the branding on the label, if its' metrics are not in the vicinity of 100% Fame, 100% Uniqueness. Research into Distinctive Assets on pack can also identify what you can safely take off without compromising branding quality. This can help make any necessary changes in a smart manner.

Should a brand "resist change" even if it doesn't have any measured distinctive assets? If an asset falls in the lower left quadrant (isn't distinctive), is it problematic to tweak/change to try to make it more distinctive? Or do you recommend leaning in and continue using the asset?

Assets fall into the Ignore or Test quadrant for two reasons. The asset could be new to the brand and lack cut through; or are much stronger for competitors. Delving deeper into current competitive links can help reveal which of these scenarios are the case.

If a specific asset is not scoring high on Distinctiveness metrics then changing that asset might not be the answer. Assets tweaks are unlikely to substantively impact your capacity to own that asset, particularly if the issue is lack of Uniqueness. An alternative option is always to select a different asset for investment in building up the brand's identity.

Have you researched combinations of brand assets rather than each individually to find an optimum combination? Do you have evidence that multisensory labels are more memorable?

Yes I have examined combined assets versus individual components, but from a stripping down multi-component assets rather than building up and combining different assets. For example in Chapter 13 on Colour-based assets, I show some results of this analysis, where testing a logo and its component parts allows us to see how much the specific colours are contributing to logo strength. This in turn allows us to determine if any colour on the logo can (or could with Investment) be used as an separate asset outside of the logo context.

An asset that works (i.e., 100% Fame, 100% Uniqueness) by itself doesn't need anything to be added, unless it improves cut-through for the branding moment. For example in a TV ad you might combine a strong visual asset with a strong audio asset. However this is to extend the reach of the branding in total, so you get the branding to someone who's eyes aren't on screen, not to bolster the specific performance of the visual asset.

Could you repeat/ elaborate on why it's a bad idea to ask customers' opinions on what they like about your assets/potential assets?

The process of using an asset to identify a brand is largely an sub-conscious automatic process, which means customers don't realise this value that long-term, familiar assets provide. Further because of our natural desire to value novelty particularly when in a research setting, they will undervalue consistent assets, and over value the new and novel leading to faulty advice.

It's like asking your child's opinion about which foods to eat. They won't deliberately choose the ones that have the best nutrition, because they are focused on taste, even though nutrition is the greatest long-term value they get from eating the food.

Just wondering from your experience which assets in the palette are most likely to fall into the Use/ Loose Quadrant?

I have learnt that any type of asset can be strong, and it is usually execution that lets assets down. Poor execution can be lack of reach, lack of prominence, weak co-presentation with the brand or lack of consistency. Indeed throughout the book there are examples in the top quadrant from most asset types and sub-types.

Is having assets across too many areas of the palette a bad idea as it's hard to build equity in all of them? Also - how many assets is a 'good' amount?!

It's about effective use of resources. If you have a choice to invest in two taglines or one tagline and one colour combination, then the two different assets give you a wider range of options to use in different contexts. However because the natural state of memory is to decay, you need to Use the brand's Distinctive Assets, to keep all assets fresh amongst those that have that link in memory, but also to build amongst new category buyers.

Therefore the building of Distinctive Assets is never completed, and trying to hold on to too many can leave the brand's assets vulnerable to erosion over time, if nothing else, due to lack of use, as well as competitive activity (this is why the top quadrant is called 'Use or lose' – to remind us that we do need to use even our strongest assets if we want to keep them).

The ideal number depends on the diversity of your media and distribution channel use, as well as your above the line marketing expenditure so your asset building activities can reach non-buyers. Chapter 12 discusses this in more detail.

Do you need to build your brand name/word mark first before you can start building your non-word Distinctive Assets? If so, how do you know when you're ready to start building Distinctive Assets alongside your brand name? Should your brand name be in the upper right use quadrant before you start building non brand name distinctive assets?

if you have low prompted brand awareness - that is many category buyers do not link your brand's name with the category then yes, address that issue first and establish that anchor in the memory of all category buyers.

But even while building category links, you can still set up your brand's identity by making sure you have the foundations of the brand's desired long term identity embedded right from the start. You can get a framework for developing this this from looking at competitor assets and counter-programming, as well as reviewing your media and distribution channels to determine which asset types are likely to be more useful. In Chapter 11 there are some guidelines to help with this.

Have you considered the relationship between Distinctive Assets and legal trademark protection? What about house brands retailers have. Being envious pays off there, doesn't it?

Yes but I have not investigated this in detail other than reviewing past efforts to trademark and/or legally protect assets by companies. It seems a very difficult exercise to do. I suspect part of the difficultly is lack of robust metrics to show the extent of the brand's ownership and that another brand's use of the assets is creating confusion in consumer memory. To my knowledge the metrics I have created have not been used in legal cases yet, but I speculate that they would help such a case. Indeed in our measurement we can see cases where the private labels are commonly mistaken for a manufacturer brand in the category. Knowing this can then feed into Distinctive Asset strategy and highlight steps that can be taken to strengthen the brand's identity, even if no legal action is taken.

What is your view on the balance between category norms/category language and being different? Do you believe that categories have some category 'language' that it helps to use or do you find that is a mistake?

If the category codes are already embedded in category buyer memory, you would be foolish not to incorporate them (or at least work around them). However trying to own such a code is creating hard work for yourself because you have the mental competition from both the meaning and other brands using those codes. Distinctive assets are hard enough to build, why make the job even more difficult by your asset selection?