



Get real: the return of the product

By GREET STERENBERG & MALCOLM BAKER

Marketers have allowed an insidious myth to gain acceptance: that products are increasingly similar and because this is inevitable, emphasis needs to be placed on branding to differentiate. Sterenberg and Baker refute this as dangerous nonsense. Drawing on a major international study as well as the obvious success of many distinctive products, they conclude that the role of branding should be to amplify the product experience, not ignore it

THE BROAD HISTORY of consumer culture has been largely concerned with the evolution of goods from commodity status to the sophisticated constructs we now call brands. And in our relationships with these constructs there is often a natural tension between elements of the product and the surrounding construction of the brand.

If you had to pick one idea that underpinned the boom in branding in the last decade, 'functional equivalence' might be it. The idea that products lack meaningful performance differentiation has been widely accepted.

As a consequence marketers have turned to the emotional components of branding to give products their distinct identity. At times product performance has almost been ignored – left off the list at the branding party. Marketers often treat it as the hygiene factor – essential but hardly exciting. As Kevin Roberts, CEO of Saatchi & Saatchi Worldwide and creator of the Lovemarks concept ventured in a recent *Frontline* interview: 'I think [a] brand's role is not based on [its] product performance at all.'

Some support for the view that marketers have ignored product performance to their cost is provided by recent data from the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ASCI). In spite of the broad adoption of quality programmes such as ISO, TQM and Six Sigma, the report card on customer satisfaction for the last 10-year period is very mixed.

While scores for fast-food brands and some automotive and personal computer brands have gone up, there have been broad declines in food manufacturing, apparel, personal care categories and many service sectors. In spite of investing tens of millions of dollars over

this period in associating their brands with quality and desirability, companies such as Coca-Cola (down 2.4%), Nestlé (-5.7%), Hewlett-Packard (-9.0%), PepsiCo (-3.5%), Anheuser Busch (-6.0%), Nike (-4.9%) and many others have suffered.

Whether the products of such companies have actually declined in measures of objective quality is debatable, but they have clearly failed to keep up with rising consumer expectations at a time when they face increasing pressure from low-wage countries and high price-cutting pressure from global retailers.

The recent troubles at General Motors, the world's largest automotive manufacturer, can be traced to a misplaced faith in the power of the brand at the expense of exciting and meaningful product differentiation.

Now, reporting from Research International's 10th RIO study, there is powerful evidence from key global consumer segments that a renewed focus on the product side of the equation is needed. In this study we spoke with over 1,200 people in 43 countries, capturing individuals who had a 'high intensity' connection with at least one brand in their lives (incidence ranged from 20% to 40% depending upon the country). This sample and the descriptions provided yielded a database of over 3,000 high-intensity brand relationships.

Why the focus on 'intensity'? Because there is strong evidence that intense brand relationships are key in maximising lifetime customer value and in generating the element of 'buzz' that is increasingly important in brand diffusion.

The value of sensory experiences

In asking people to describe their brand relationships and the key drivers behind them,

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The importance of product experience

'The lightness of *Nike's* shoes when you run and at the same time their solidity.'

Italy

'*Mercedes*...Like swimming on waves.'

Russia

'I like the quiet and dignified sound while this whisky [*Nikka*] that glows like gold is poured into the glass.'

Japan

'You put on something by *Armani* and just the feel of it is different; it envelops you in something different.'

Spain

'Ah the sound when I open my *L'Oréal Gloss*. A mixture of squeak and zip. The smell! You could eat it.'

France

'*Le Petit Camembert*. The characteristic sound of the paper around it is authentic of a genuine camembert. Its surface is mountainous to the touch. It moves.'

France

'Walking around in a *Nature and Discovery shop* gives you a strong feeling of wellness; all those perfumes, the aesthetics.'

Belgium

'Feeling the weight of my *Nikon* gives me a feeling of safety.'

Denmark

'My *Raybans*. A piece of art.'

Netherlands

what did we find? Did we hear about the mystery and intimacy of the brand connection? Or the warm feelings engendered by association with the brand?

While branding elements clearly have a key role to play in building and sustaining intensity, at the heart of the majority of these relationships sat an intensified product experience, often described in polysensory terms. Touch, smell, taste, feel, appearance, sound, great design – these are the modalities that frequently drive a great brand relationship, either separately or in powerful combinations. Above all, these consumers were focused on the product experience first, the brand relationship second (see box opposite).

Understanding customers' experiences

Why are sensory and polysensory excellence so vital to creating brand experiences? For one thing a sensory touchpoint can confirm the experience, make it real. For one Norwegian, 'the click from my Nikon is the sign that we have created something together'. Sensory pleasure is also often linked with the natural world by people, so for urban consumers it can turn brands into refuges from a virtual or industrialised environment.

A sensory touchpoint can act as the point of transmission for a brand's communications – one Japanese consumer praised the 'quiet and dignified' sound *Nikka* whisky makes as it is poured. These attributes might be part of the brand image, and sensory excellence has made them real. Finally, consumers have a tendency to attribute human qualities to brands they feel connected to, and a polysensory experience can make a product seem more rounded and alive.

Great brand relationships begin with powerful product experiences. Marketers need to set the highest priority on understanding and improving the interface between the customer and the product. Steven Jobs' obsession with this interface has led not only to the design triumphs of the iMac G5 and the increasingly iconic iPod but has also driven him to produce (to date) four different generations of iPod interface software, aimed at making a great



A Nikon F3/T.
The Nikon brand experience includes a sensory touchpoint.



The Sony NAS-CZ1 network audio system. Sony is a brand that has captured consumers' imaginations, adding emotional value to the listening experience.

product experience even greater.

Marketers who obsess about the customer experience, whether it be Apple, Jet Blue or Ikea, not only put the consumer at the heart of their innovation process, but also use multi-disciplinary approaches to generate insights that will provide competitive advantage.

The California-based industrial design group, Ideo, uses sociologists and anthropologists to help it drive a product design process that is characterised by a rapid sequencing of observation, prototyping and fast implementation. Its design philosophy is underpinned by what founder Bill Moggridge calls 'designing verbs not nouns'. (Brands are nouns, product experiences are verbs.)

Research International's own Super Group process relies on highly creative consumer partners to ideate and dig deeply into the product experience, using tools such as accompanied shopping and other connections borrowed from ethnography – for example, consumer journals and cross-category 'cool' hunting.

All these approaches implicitly acknowledge the limitations of traditional innovation and research processes, which have relied too heavily upon the power of conversation and have not concentrated sufficiently upon

behaviour. Serendipity and the observation and understanding of what the author Fulton Suri calls 'Thoughtless Acts' (in her book of the same name) are central to this development philosophy.

The brand role: amplifier of product experience

But if it is the product experience that is increasingly central to branding, what role does the brand have to play? We believe that a critical role for the brand in this new order is to act as an amplifier of the product experience.

To help understand how branding works in the experience mode, imagine two products that, though identical, generate two very different experiences – the one intense, the

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other mundane. The intense experience is formed because of the consumer's identification with specific aspects of the brand story that, if told right, help amplify the product experience. Lacking an appropriate brand story, or even a brand at all, the mundane experience remains, well, mundane.

In this context branding works like an amplifier. If the consumer identifies with key elements of the brand story, and these elements capture his imagination, then the net effect is for the product experience to be enriched and felt more intensely, as shown by the following examples.

'Especially the perfect design and form factors are outstanding. When listening to music with *Sony* products, I forget about everything outside – it's only the music and me.'

Austria

'*Nike* ... powerful, confident, like an achiever... I felt like everyone else before.'

South Africa

'*Ben & Jerry's* ... It makes the bad go away with just one bite.'

USA



Ben & Jerry's icecream: 'It makes the bad go away with one bite'.

Strategies for intensifying the experience

Sensory touchpoints

Putting the product experience at the centre of the brand promise can be achieved by developing sensory touchpoints not normally associated with a category or by taking steps to 'own' a critical performance attribute.

Apple revolutionised its image in personal computers some years ago by bringing colour and radical design to its iMac series. In the UK, Walker's crisps boasts that its new lines are the noisiest, crunchiest snacks yet. A Japanese tyre company has patented the smell of its products, just as Harley-Davidson patented the distinctive sound of its motorcycle engines. Nestlé's Nespresso and Dyson have both been successful at putting design at the heart of the consumer promise and linking that to a differentiating product experience.

A hunger for authenticity

Another strategy for the marketer wishing to build a more intensified and meaningful product experience is to tap into the hunger for authenticity, a key driver among young people.

Authenticity of ingredients in food, drink, clothing and cosmetics is especially salient. Think Levi's jeans, Coca-Cola, Body Shop and the extraordinary growth in many luxury and near-luxury brands over the last 10 years. And in many parts of the world authenticity is linked to origin of manufacture. In Moscow, a Heineken brewed in Holland is more welcome than one locally produced. In Indonesia, Pampers manufactured in Djakarta are less desirable than those imported from Cincinnati.

Storytelling

Storytelling can be another very effective device for amplifying and transforming a product experience. A successful brand story builds a more intimate and enduring connection by providing continuity between one product experience and another. The best stories embed themselves in the customer's imagination, where



they are deepened and coloured by his or her own material.

An excellent example of an amplifying brand story is provided by Moleskine, the Italian brand of notebook, which includes this text inside every product it sells:

'It is two centuries now that Moleskine has been the legendary notebook of European artists and intellectuals, from Van Gogh to Henri Matisse to Ernest Hemingway ... This long standing tradition was continued by writer-traveller Bruce Chatwin, who used to buy his Moleskines at a Paris stationery shop where he would always stock up before embarking on one of his journeys. Now the Moleskine is back again. This silent and discreet keeper of an extraordinary tradition which has been missing for years has once again set out on its journey. A witness to contemporary nomadism, it can once again pass from one pocket to another to continue the adventure ... the sequel still waits to be written and its blank pages are ready to tell the story.'

This communication establishes the brand's story by means of an appeal to the authority of great artists – from Van Gogh to Hemingway. It then uses a more contemporary example – Chatwin – to show the brand's ability to care for and accompany its users, and reinforces this by referencing the concept of 'silence' and 'discretion'. Then it ties this explicitly to the product experience – writing on its blank pages – and directly invites the user to share in the brand experience. The communication draws on several kinds of emotional appeal but all of them lead up to an invitation to partake in a product experience and in doing so potentially transform oneself into a nomad, a 'writer-traveller'.

This is not the only kind of brand story. Brands might celebrate the spirit and vision of their founders and transmit that in the product experience (for example, Virgin). They might articulate the philosophy and values of the company (such as the Body Shop). They might simply describe the perfect conditions or mindset with which to enjoy an amplified product experience. Coca-Cola's brand stories tend to

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be of this kind. Unilever's Dove soap successfully uses an ingredient story to drive its overall 'Real Beauty' positioning.

Putting the product at the heart of the promise

There are powerful opportunities for brand owners to revitalise their brands by putting the product experience back at the heart of the brand promise. Doing this effectively will require the careful identification and development of performance opportunities. These opportunities may lie in the product's existing polysensory profile or in creating touchpoints that play on senses that are not usually part of the product experience – for example, Lush cosmetics in the UK, whose soap bars are often designed to look and smell like huge bars of confectionery.

An innovative process with an intensive focus on the interface between consumer and product, such as that which led to Apple's iPod, is critical as a source for insight and inspiration.

Finally, branding architects will want to explore how to tie branding messages more tightly to the product experience so that the ownership and consumption intensity can be amplified.

One industry opportunity here would be the development of agency offerings and processes that totally integrate product design with brand development.

These goals will allow marketers to more effectively align the functional and emotional components of their branding communications so that more exciting and enduring relationships can be built. ☺