

Whose brand is it anyway?

How the world of brand management is changing to a more fluid and dynamic approach

The answer to the question of who 'owns' a brand might appear to be self-evident. Yet the answer is not as simple as it first seems. Traditional marketing thinking with its managerial perspective, would argue that it is the company that owns the brand. In one sense this is true. A company owns the intellectual property that has gone into the design and development of the brand. It tries to invest the brand with relevant value and communicate that through its marketing communications. However, the company does not own the outcome. When adidas uses the singer Pharrell Williams as the designer for its Human Race sneakers, it aims to suggest specific associations, but whether it succeeds or not is determined by the consumer, not adidas. If I like Williams' music and adidas I might be spending my evenings with other sneakerheads sharing thoughts about the brand online and perhaps telling people about it when I meet them.

Perhaps then it would make sense to argue that it is you (the consumer) that owns the brand. This is an interesting shift because it taps into the idea that while the company makes an offer, it is the user who determines value through their use of the brand. Yet, this is slightly misplaced, because what the consumer owns here is the experience of purchase, rather than the brand itself.

A space in between

It becomes apparent that the brand then is neither owned by the organization nor by the consumer, but rather it is created through the interactions and negotiations made continually between the organization and its stakeholders and between stakeholders. This view of a connected individual and an organization suggests we should not see two separate entities, but rather a space where the two fuse. More than this: once we expand the relationship from a simple one between the brand and the individual, we can begin to see a network of evolving connections. Consumers can be commentators, innovators and investors. They will often be employees themselves and also have relationships directly with users, intermediaries and employees in other organisations. In

this context the brand is always 'becoming', as a spectrum of different meanings emerge from interactions. The implication of this is that brands are co-created in a networked world. No longer can we see brands as having an organizationally determined fixed meaning. Rather they become fluid and adaptive and their meaning emerges out of this polyphony.

The example of Tate Modern

Take, for example, a cultural brand, such as Tate Modern in London. Tate Modern has a distinctive idea of itself, that is rooted in its location, its role in cultural life and its collection of modern and contemporary art. It's highly successful and has more visitors than any other attraction in the UK (nearly 6 million people a year). Yet, the Tate Modern brand is not solely defined by a coterie of managers. Inside the Tate, there are many voices including curators, communicators and educationalists, while outside there are artists, critics, members and visitors. All have the possibility to talk and to shape what the brand is through what they say and write. The Icelandic-Danish artist, Olafur Eliasson, who has had major exhibitions at Tate Modern in 2003 and 2019, notes that a cultural institution '...has to do with collaborative agency, with creating a space that increases trust – it's about 'we-ness'. In other words, a place where people can come together and co-create meaning.

The implications for brand management

What might the implication of this co-creative perspective be? It means that managers still have influence over the direction of a brand (and it is important that they are clear about what the intended brand meaning is) but they no longer 'own' or control it. This in turn argues brand co-creation is a fact of life. Whether organizations choose to embrace co-creation and build communities and networks and develop ideas with their consumers or not, they cannot avoid the reality that their brands will morph into new shapes through the actions and communications of their stakeholders. The co-creative approach to brand building therefore involves less managing and more humility, listening and learning together with others.

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