

# Complex relationships abound

*Heather Maitland* discovers that most research into brands is case-study based and here she explains why

Branding is well researched: Google Scholar comes up with over 6,000 books and articles published in academic journals with 'brand' in the title. Mark J Kay<sup>1</sup> points out, though, that much of the research into successful brands is based on case studies. These case studies have shaped the way that brands are managed, emphasising the importance of differentiation and consistency. In effect, many researchers and commentators are saying to us, 'This is self-evidently a strong brand. This is what the company did so we should do it too.' But often, we have very different products, customers and contexts that make the specifics of the case study irrelevant. Mark J Kay says what is missing is a coherent theory that explains the processes managers and marketers can apply to ensure their own brands are different and consistent. So why the emphasis on case studies? Much of the research focuses on the complex relationships customers have with brands. Franz-Rudolf Esch and his colleagues<sup>2</sup> say most brand managers spend considerable resources on measuring brand awareness and brand knowledge (i.e. what the customer

associates with the brand name). They argue that brand managers should focus on the brand relationship as this is far more important in the long term. Brand relationship, they propose, is based on satisfaction, trust and attachment – all emotional factors. Both researchers and brand managers talk about creating 'emotional truths' and 'brand enthusiasm'. Dori Mellitor, for example, says: 'getting at the subconscious drivers of consumer behaviour required a whole new approach that transcended the traditional sphere of sales data and focus groups. A more strategic approach – one that divines consumer behaviour and infuses it with intuition and imagination – was required.'<sup>3</sup>

Although she says it is 'strategic', we're on fuzzy territory here where it is difficult to identify exactly which factors make a difference to customers' individual emotional responses. Some commentators talk about identifying 'universal truths'.<sup>4</sup> But how do you work out what is universal?

When researchers into brands seek out certainties, they can end up stating the obvious. Peter Drinkwater and Mark Uncles researched the relationship between consumers'

perceptions of programmes and the broadcasters' overall brand. They concluded that a poor quality programme or one that seems incompatible with the channel brand has a negative effect on that brand.<sup>5</sup> No kidding.

Emily Boyle takes a different approach. She cites sources that say that 'some 75 to 85 percent of new brands launched on the market fail ... when they do fail it is often not possible "to ascertain with any certainty the reasons for the success or failure of a brand"'.<sup>6</sup> Stephen Brown and his colleagues point out that brand managers often don't understand that their brands are 'complex, heterogeneous and experiential' and this impacts on their potential for development.<sup>7</sup>

Current ideas, including the research by these two academics, focus on the co-production of brands by the consumer rather than their creation as a result of marketing activity. This is a helpful way of looking at the complexity of brands.

Emily Boyle has created a theoretical model of this co-creation process. She identifies five stages, each dependent on the preceding stages:



1. The development of a product that offers product advantage based on a range of unique attributes valued by the customer. This stage is in the control of the company.
2. The creation of brand awareness through marketing communications which stimulate consumer desire.
3. The interpretation of communications to form brand associations before the consumer has directly experienced the product. This is as a result of emotional responses to the marketing messages. The more relevant the message, the more persuasive it is. Although the brand manager controls the message, they cannot control how it is interpreted by the consumer.
4. The formation of post-consumption brand associations which may involve a re-evaluation of their pre-consumption beliefs. These may involve a combination of a rational evaluation, one based on value judgements and a third framework based on emotional responses. These are completely outside the brand manager's control.
5. The creation of brand loyalty through repeated consumption

which reinforces the unique qualities of the product and its consistency. Where brand loyalty is strong, however, consumers tend to forgive any discrepancies. Again, this is not in the brand manager's control.

So what does this mean for arts marketers?

First, our job is made a lot easier if the product development process results in events that audiences, visitors and participants value and perceive as different to the arts experiences provided by anyone else. We should focus on developing relationships with existing and potential customers. We should make sure we understand how they feel about our brand and the value they associate with it. We should take a systematic approach to building relationships based on that understanding.

Unfortunately, Emily Boyle concludes by pointing out the level of disagreement about the most effective ways of sustaining your brand: is it primarily about keeping customers (brand loyalty) or building market share (developing brand co-creation)? It appears the jury is still out. ■

<sup>1</sup> Mark J. Kay, 'Strong brands and corporate brands', *European Journal of Marketing*, 40 (2006), 742–760

<sup>2</sup> Franz-Rudolf Esch, Tobias Langner, Bernd H. Schmitt, Patrick Geus, 'Are brands forever? How brand knowledge and relationships affect current and future purchases', *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, 15 (2006), 98–105

<sup>3</sup> Dori Mellitor, 'The Emotional Truth', *The Hub*, September/October 2006, 12–16

<sup>4</sup> Andrea Learned, 'Marketing via stories: the selling power of narrative in a conceptual age', consulted at <http://www.marketingprofs.com/7/marketing-via-stories-selling-power-conceptual-age-learned.asp> 9/11/07

<sup>5</sup> Peter Drinkwater and Mark Uncles, 'The impact of program brands on consumer evaluations of television and radio broadcaster brands', *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, 16 (2007), 178–187

<sup>6</sup> Emily Boyle, 'A process model of brand co-creation: brand management and research implications', *Journal of Product and Brand Management*, 16 (2007), 122–131

<sup>7</sup> Stephen Brown, Robert V. Kozinets, & John F. Sherry Jr., 'Teaching old brands new tricks: retro branding and the revival of brand meaning', *Journal of Marketing*, 67, 3, 19–33



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