Brand and Corporate Personality as Relationships – systems theory

(Summary abstract - Ian West 2003)

There have been a number of approaches to brand and corporate personality theory & practice which have considered the brand as analogous to a person. These approaches commonly operate by imbuing the brand with human traits, or, less commonly, values. For example a brand might be seen as being sincere, spirited, fun, pretentious or competent. But human traits don't exist in a vacuum; they are socially emergent and require at least two active participants for them to be revealed.

Personality Models

Many of the attempts to analyse and utilise brand-as-person models build upon theoretical psychological concept of personality.

In the early 20th Century, C.G. Jung was influential in introducing and elaborating upon a theory of psychological types. Type theories lost out to behaviourism and traits, and only a trait interpretation of Jung's introversion and extraversion was considered measurable. Hans Eysenck also proposed a model of the dimensions of personality, one axis of which was the introversion extraversion scale.

Without delving too deeply in psychological theory, there is one important point to be drawn from early personality theory if it is to be useful in relation to brand personality. That is that the axes are continuums. Many marketers (and a few psychologists) simplify the scales to matrices. The result is that the subject is either in one box or the other. But it is obvious that even in the introversion / extraversion example, no one is either wholly extravert or wholly introvert all the time – they are somewhere along a scale.

The use of scales more valid, and also allows more fine-grained analyses.

Relationship Models

People may consider lawyers as conservative and pedantic – perhaps not the personality one might aspire to. However, when you are in need of the services of such a person, a trustworthy, conservative person may be just the sort of personality you might value and respect – the Volvo brand personality.

This is the concept of a relationship model of brand personality – the relationship of a person to a brand, and vice versa, analogous to the relationship between two people.

Brand Personality and the Brand-as-person Model

Brand-as-person

Some examples of the types of the brand-as-person model and the types of relationship you might have with people sharing those relationships are described below:

Type	Characteristics	Example brands	Relationship model
Conservative	Trustworthy, old-fashioned, sincere	Marks and Spencer, AGA, Kodak, Guinness	Like that with a respected member of the family
Exciting	Fashionable, outgoing, young, fun	GAP, Nokia, Mini, Red Bull	Like the sort of person you would like to spend an evening or weekend with
Competent	Accomplished, able skilled, influential	Financial Times, BBC, IBM, Volkswagen	The relationship with a teacher or business leader
Sophisticated	Wealthy, stylish, pretentious	Mercedes, Harvey Nichols, Vogue, Mont Blanc	The relationship with a wealthy relative, or a powerful boss

These types can of course be paired in dialectics with one extreme at either end and a midpoint.

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   Conservative   Exciting

This is a useful approach, because as with people, nobody is either wholly at one end of the scale or the other, but somewhere along the scale

The relationship model requires an active partner at both ends – the brand and the consumer. This is why we can consider it as a systems interaction model. How the brand relates to the consumer and how the consumer reacts to the brand are parts of an active system. Changes in one result in changes in the other.

One way of looking at this is to consider what the brand would think of you, or as Max Blackstone asked, 'how would the brand talk to you?' Would it support you, be sympathetic, applaud your good taste, talk down to you, or intimidate you?

Fred Posner talked about the brand as a friend, or as a trusted or aspirational associate. Such a relationship can be the basis of real differentiation and competitive advantage.

Brand Personality

If the brand-as-person model deals with the relationship between the brand and the person, the brand personality is about the type of person the brand represents. Where the brand-as-person model operates at a pragmatic systems level, the brand personality deals at an emotional level and is also concerned with the brand values.

Pragmatic Analysis and Emotional Values – how we learn about brands

There are two main ways we learn about anything, brands included. The first is active learning the way we learn at school by absorbing declarative knowledge such as: 'Paris is the capital of France', or '6 x 2 = 12'. The second way we learn is by passive learning, the way a child learns to speak. We can characterise the first by a high degree of involvement and the latter by a low involvement.

Knowledge which is the outcome of active involvement processing (AIP) is accessible to active recall. This is typically the way brand advertising messages work. Facts which are communicated to the consumer are (hopefully) retained and can be recalled. So we know *how* we know that 'Carlsberg is probably the finest lager in the world' – because we read it in an ad. AIP is what drives rational brand choice

Passive involvement processing (PIP) is subconscious and automatic. In brand sectors where there is little differentiation and equally performing products (such as lager or cigarettes) brand choice is mainly intuitive. Learning is implicit rather than explicit and can't be accessed by active recall. We may know what we know – but we don't know how we learned it. PIP is what drives intuitive brand choice.

Brand Relationship	Active Processing - AIP	Pragmatic, rational brand choice
Brand Personality	Passive Processing - PIP	Intuitive, emotional brand choice

Theory into practice

How can these approaches be applied to brand and corporate development strategies? There are many applications, but bearing in mind the importance of the brand relationship, both participants should be considered, the consumer and the brand. The apparent circularity of this approach has the advantage of enabling the categorisation of both consumers and brands.

Major, well-known brands can be categorised into groups by brand relationships and brand personalisation, representing required positions along the desired dialectic scale. The most common way of representing this practically is using style boards with logos of the brands grouped together.

Consumers can be segmented into groups by brand relationships and brand personalisation on a basis of liked and disliked known brands. Brands which are the subject of the research can be allocated to the well-known brands group with which they have most in common. Questionnaires and interviews can be used to analyse both the pragmatic and intuitive elements of the brand personality.

Factors driving brand choice have both a rational and emotional content and even marketing communications strategies which are fundamentally pragmatic also have an emotional dimension.

Marketing communications strategies can be developed to influence brand choice, but brand personality issues may involve matters of corporate values not directly amenable to marcoms activity. It may be necessary to make more deep rooted changes to structures, practices and cultures within the organisation which is brand custodian in order to modify the emotional values which it represents.