

Repositioning Brands for Growth

Brand essence: why have we got it wrong?

'Brand essence' is commonly used to help marketers distil what a brand stands for. Typically it is seen as a 'single thing' that is fixed at the heart of the brand over time, irrespective of changing market conditions.

Consequently, marketers spend considerable time trying to distil a brand's essence down to a particular 'word' or 'set of words' – only for it to become so bland or generic that it's no longer differentiating or is so quickly out of date that it doesn't get used. In essence (to coin a phrase) the 'brand essence' model has been 'static'.

Brands are living, breathing entities

If we reflect on how 'brand essence' is used in marketing we can see that the idea of having one static brand essence is flawed.

Firstly, brands contain lots of different essences or 'nesses' that may vary by market geography or over time.

For example,



contains 'youthfulness', 'Americanness' and 'fizziness'.



contains 'Irishness', 'timelessness' and 'mellowness'.

This results in brands not having just one essence but a combination of sub-essences or values, that are structured in a unique way.

Secondly, brands structure these sub-essences or values in different ways with some values being more associated with a brand and some less so. This explains why two brands can contain similar values, but remain entirely different from each other. For example, Volvo and Ford both have the value of 'safety' but for Ford it is a relatively small part of its overall positioning; for Volvo, 'safety' has played a major part in defining what the brand is about. Both brands have the same value, but in quite different places in their 'brand hierarchies' and thus each brand is well-known for different things.

Thirdly, thinking about brands as living, breathing entities helps marketers think about their brands more realistically.

Extraordinarily, most brand models contain nothing but positive values for a brand, as they are constructed as idealistic summaries of how their brand owners want their brand to be seen. But most brands also have negative values (e.g., for Volvo the flip side of 'safe' was 'dull') creating a branding issue which is not picked up in conventional brand models. In contrast, a 'Dynamic Brand Essence' model identifies how the brand is in the place where it counts the most – in the mind of the consumer – and so it is possible to analyse whether a particular value should be made more salient or recessive.

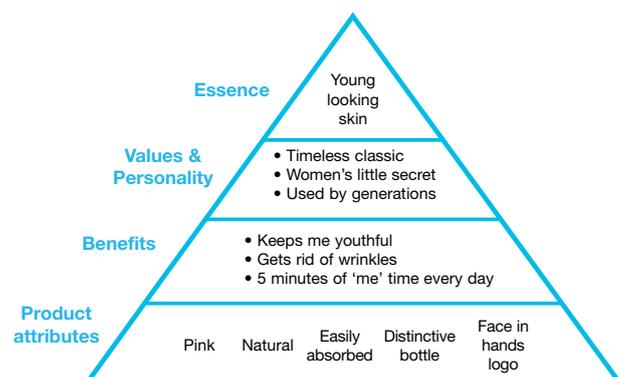
Creating a Dynamic Brand Essence

Whilst it's important to keep a high level brand essence as a guiding principle for the entire employee base, the true essence of a brand should be managed in a more dynamic way by:

- Identifying the key values or sub-essences each brand contains (i.e. the top 5 or so relevant values that people associate with a brand)
- Understanding which values are associated most with the brand, and which less so
- Identifying, in more detail, 'what sort of sub-essence' each value is (e.g. exactly what type of 'Americanness' does Coca Cola have, and whether this is a positive or negative influence on the brand)

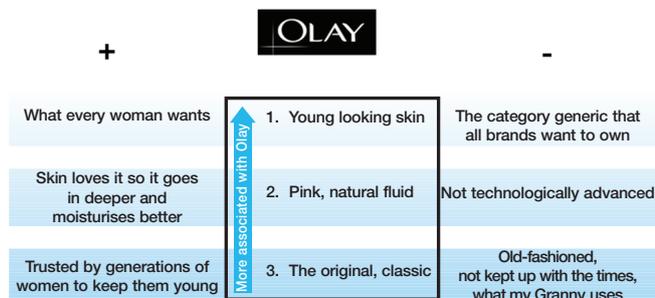
Marketers have traditionally used brand pyramids or onions to convey a brand essence – with the words or phrase that best defines the brand at the top or in the heart.

The Static Brand Essence Model: Olay in 1990's



In contrast, we believe that the model should convey the key brand values (i.e. in Olay's case below, these are 'young looking skin', 'pink, natural fluid' and 'original & classic'), their hierarchy, with those values that are most dominant at the top (i.e. 'young looking skin' being the primary value that Olay owned at that time) and a description of what sort of value it is (i.e. both its positives and negatives).

The Dynamic Brand Essence Model: Olay



Bringing the brand essence to life

For creative agencies, the 'Dynamic Brand Essence' model transforms how brand positionings are brought to life. By comparing brands versus their competitors, the model helps identify which 'core values' to lead on, which 'lesser' values need more focus, and which 'negative' values to address. For example, Olay in the mid-1990's needed to

- Move away from the category generic of 'young looking skin' to 'prove' why Olay was better than competitors; it did this with its groundbreaking 'We can prove you can look younger' campaign and compelling 'See the difference in 14 days' claim, using older women who know about ageing to make the claims credible
- Address its old-fashioned negative image by launching new technologically advanced creams, gels and fluids (that weren't 'pink') and communicating why they were scientifically proven to be better

This resulted in Olay tripling its market share to 60% in the UK within 3 years and to the campaign being rolled out worldwide – a staggering result at that time.

The 'Dynamic Brand Essence' model also helps agencies manage the increased media and segment fragmentation – by dialling up different values or 'nesses' in different mediums according to which message is most relevant.

Similarly, the new brand essence model helps frontline teams, such as sales and call centre people, to bring the brand to life when talking with customers. By identifying the major brand values that need to be communicated as well as their importance in the hierarchy, sales people can cover all of the key messages in their optimal order of importance, as well as address any negatives that are stopping customers from buying the brand today.

What should we do differently tomorrow?

Many brands have essences that are uninspiring, bland or generic – resulting in them sitting on the shelf rather than inspiring creative agencies or frontline employees. In contrast, to be able to create a 'Dynamic Brand Essence', marketers will need to know for both their brands and competitors

- All of the major brand values that each brand has
- How they are structured in a hierarchy and how this differs from competitors
- If there are any negatives that need to be addressed

If there are any data gaps they can often be filled quickly and cost-efficiently, by interrogating any existing market research data harder or doing bespoke research, to ensure that the brand is positioned where it should be.

Additionally, to create a consistent brand, its brand essence needs to be brought to life across all high impact customer touch points – whether they be in marketing's remit (e.g. media, PR, packaging) or managed by other functional areas (e.g. sales, purchasing, supply). To achieve this, marketing needs to form close alliances with its cross-functional peer group – working together to find cost-efficient ways to bring the brand to life in a memorable way.

Are your brands positioned for growth? Are they superior to competitors? Are they being managed dynamically? If not then our new Dynamic Brand Essence model could be just what you need to recapture the high ground and set your brands back onto the path of success.

Ruth Saunders is a joint founder and leading partner of Galleon Blue – a new type of consultancy that merges commercial thinking with branding to help companies maximise the value and return of their brands. With over 20 years of experience in marketing and brand strategy (including time at McKinsey, Prophet, Procter & Gamble and Saatchi & Saatchi), Ruth has helped companies across a range of industries and geographies develop and implement more customer-focused and business-driven brand strategies. She can be reached at rsaunders@galleonblue.com or on +44 7768 600906.



Chris Barnham, a qualitative researcher and semiotician, helps clients create compelling brand positionings that can be credibly brought to life, and has written extensively on the structure of brand essence and the ways in which it can be qualitatively researched. He is also a Visiting Fellow at Kingston University and can be reached on +44 7976 700683