Guest Editorial

Marketing Intelligence & Planning

Special Issue on “The Trouble with Brands: Provocations and Possibilities”

Guest editors: Ross Brennan and Sue Vaux Halliday, University of Hertfordshire

This special issue has its origins in the 2014 conference “The Trouble with Brands: Provocations and Possibilities” held at the Hertfordshire Business School under the auspices of the UK Academy of Marketing’s Special Interest Group on Brand, Identity and Corporate Reputation. For this special issue we have selected six articles addressing three themes. Those themes are brand co-creation (the first article in the issue), stakeholder brand-building in business-to-business markets (the next two articles), and brand communication in consumer markets (the final three articles).

The first theme—brand co-creation—is addressed in an article by Cassandra France, Bill Merrilees, and Dale Miller. This article won the award for the best paper presented at our 2014 conference. It is the only article here that does not include the analysis of original data; in the academic vernacular, it is a “conceptual paper”. However, it is very much more helpful to think of this article as an “agenda-setting paper”, or as a paper in which ambitious branding researchers can find a host of ideas for future research directions. The authors propose a new definition of customer brand co-creation that emphasises co-creation as a behavioural construct that is customer-led: *Customer brand co-creation behaviours are the customer-led interactions between the customer and the brand*. They operationalise their definition in the form of a well-developed customer brand co-creation model which, one assumes, will provide fertile ground for future empirical investigations.

The second theme—stakeholder brand-building in business-to-business markets—is addressed by Veronika Tarnovskaya in the context of suppliers (as stakeholders) to IKEA, and by Alireza Sheikh & Ming Lim in the context of employees (as stakeholders) in a UK engineering services company. Tarnovskaya’s empirical study was conducted among Chinese suppliers to IKEA, and was designed to test the extent to which the attitude of those suppliers could best be described in theological terms, or in pragmatic terms. A theological brand contract is one that is driven as though from above by the firm, and is best described using words such as ‘covenant’ and ‘unconditional promise’. A pragmatic brand contract is one that is based on reciprocity, and that can be explained using relatively rational theories of human behaviour such as social exchange theory and social contract theory. There is evidence for both the theological and the pragmatic approaches in the attitudes of the IKEA suppliers. Certainly, the first question that jumped to mind on reading this article was: would we obtain similar or different results in a strikingly different cultural context? Perhaps there is scope for further research there.

While Tarnovskaya looks at suppliers as stakeholders in the corporate brand, Sheikh and Lim focus on professional employees as stakeholders in the corporate brand. Not surprisingly, perhaps, there are contradictions in the brand attachments of these skilled engineers; they take pride in being associated with a brand that is renowned for quality, performance and technological excellence, but are somewhat disquieted by the association of their employer’s brand with military applications. In addition, employees such as these skilled professional have their own personal brands, and must find a way of reconciling their personal brand with the corporate brand—Sheikh & Lim refer to this as the *clarity of congruence* between the personal brand of the engineer and the corporate brand. Some engineers struggle to reconcile their personal values with the values associated with the corporate brand.

The remaining three articles address different aspects of brands and brand communication in consumer markets. The first of these, by Emmanuel Mogaji, is a fascinating read. This article follows in the fairly lengthy tradition of research that applies quantitative content analysis to media reports; in this case, the media analysed are advertisements in nine British newspapers, and the foci of attention are the ‘protected characteristics’ defined in British anti-discrimination legislation. Those protected characteristics are age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage (and civil partnership), pregnancy and maternity, race, religion and belief, sex, and sexual orientation. This is one of those articles where you can test your own preconceptions about how groups are represented in advertising against the facts. Briefly, some of the facts are that disabled people, older people and pregnant or nursing women appear disproportionately little in newspaper advertising. Women appear disproportionately often in fashion and household advertising. Men appear disproportionately often in banking and telecommunications advertising. One is tempted to say *plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose*, and, frankly, it is a bit disappointing when you are in your sixth decade and you read research results that seem to reflect social attitudes from your first. You can make your own judgement.

Moving on swiftly from the subject of the guest editors’ sixth decade (your guest editors almost, but not quite, share the same birth date), Tafesse’s article brings us up to date and addresses brand engagement with social media by examining the interactions between brand posts and Facebook user responses in the field of automotive brands. So, now we find ourselves in the world of Facebook likes and shares, and the question is: what type of Facebook post gets the most likes and shares? Likes seem easier to achieve than shares, and likes can be optimised by posting content that is vivid, novel, consistent with the brand image, and entertaining. Things seem to be less clear regarding shares, although again novelty and brand consistency are important. However, greater post interactivity is associated with fewer likes and fewer shares.

Finally, Pedro Marcelo Torres, Mário Gomes Augusto, and João Veríssimo Lisboa return to the theme of consumer-based brand equity with the intention of resolving the question of the relationship between the dimensions of brand equity. Those dimensions are generally accepted to be brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality, brand loyalty and other proprietary brand assets. In the empirical findings reported here, based on a study conducted in the consumer market for beer, the authors find that perceived quality is an important influence on brand loyalty, and that brand loyalty is, in turn, an important influence on brand equity.

So, those are our ‘provocations and possibilities’ in the field of branding. From an article that sets a new agenda in customer brand co-creation, to an article that seems to suggest that British advertising still substantially reflects social attitudes from the 1950s and 1960s; from theological branding to consumer-based brand equity; and, from professional employees who struggle to reconcile their personal brands with the corporate brand to the question of how to get more Facebook likes and shares for your brand. Eclectic, interesting, contentious, and, hopefully, provocative.

Ross Brennan and Sue Vaux Halliday