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What You Really See in the Mirror: A Consumer's Journey with Self-Brand Congruence

Abstract

In my own life, I have a set of brands that describe my personality, interests, and lifestyle. So, how do companies build this connection between the brand and the consumers' self-perception? I researched the methods used to establish self-congruence with a brand, meaning how the brand's personality fits with the consumer's actual self, versus the consumer's ideal self. I also examined the different ways advertising can increase brand congruity with the consumer, especially focusing on celebrity endorsements, purchase promotions, and the use of imagery in specific forms of advertising.

Keywords

self-brand congruence, marketing, consumer engagement, self-brand, consumer

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A Consumer's Journey with Self-Brand Congruence***

Alexis Verone

Abstract

In my own life, I have a set of brands that describe my personality, interests, and lifestyle. So, how do companies build this connection between the brand and the consumers' self-perception? I researched the methods used to establish self-congruence with a brand, meaning how the brand's personality fits with the consumer's actual self, versus the consumer's ideal self. I also examined the different ways advertising can increase brand congruity with the consumer, especially focusing on celebrity endorsements, purchase promotions, and the use of imagery in specific forms of advertising.

Introduction

Every consumer possesses a set of brands that represents their personality, interests, and lifestyle. In order to gain the consumer's business and retain their loyalty, a brand's personality must be compatible with his or her self-concept. This connection between brand and consumer is essential for successful advertising, brand recognition, brand attachment, and long-term product loyalty.

The Consumer Psychology of Brands

To first understand the significance and measurement of a person's self-congruence with a brand, it is essential first to understand the basic consumer psychology of brands and their cognitive affect. A comprehensive framework of the perception of brands within the mind of the consumer can be constructed from three levels of consumer engagement and from five processes for the application of the connection (Schmitt 2011). This framework

acts as a model for consumer comprehension and brand association to one's ideal and actual self.

Levels of Consumer Engagement

Consumers can perceive brands and make judgments based on unique characteristics the brand may possess, and a variety of stimuli relating to their own personal level of engagement. In fact, the consumer psychology of brands model reflects an understanding that different levels of psychological engagement are formed in correspondence with brands due to different needs, motives, and goals (Schmitt 2011). Three layers represent these levels:

the innermost layer represents object-centered, functionally driven engagement where the consumer is acquiring information about the brand with the goal of receiving utilitarian benefits from the brand; the middle layer represents a self-centered engagement where the brand is seen as personally relevant to the consumer; and the outer layer represents social engagement with the brand where the brand is viewed from an interpersonal and socio-cultural perspective to provide a sense of community (8 Schmitt 2011).

The brand often becomes significantly more meaningful to the consumer as their association moves from the inner to outer layer (Schmitt 2011).

Processes for Applying Consumer-Brand Connection

Within these levels of consumer engagement, there are processes for applying that connection to the brand itself. The first process is *identifying*, which refers to searching and collecting information about a brand, and then being exposed to its overall category and related products (Schmitt 2011). This level of engagement is usually dependent on the consumer's brand categorization, associations with the brand, or inter-brand relations (Schmitt 2011). These factors contribute to brand awareness, recall and recognition of a brand, whether a new product category should be integrated as part of a brand extension, and brand identity in comparison to self-relevance.

The second process is *experiencing*, which encompasses the sensory and participatory perceptions a consumer is exposed to within the overall brand experience (Schmitt 2011). The consumer's emotions play a large role in this process, and can lead to a negative or positive affect on the brand depending on the marketing approach and selling proposition. The third process is *integrating*, which allows the consumer to use their knowledge of a brand to create a brand concept, personality, or personal relationship (Schmitt 2011). Most consumers categorize brands based on the purchase intention, such as quality, innovation, or lifestyle. Matching a brand with human personality perceptions (e.g., sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness) allows the consumer to associate him or herself with the brand and then decide to build a relationship (Schmitt 2011). In fact, the basis for consumer's affection is contributed from the human characteristics given to the brand and the qualities that make up the personality (Malar, Krohmer, & Nyffenegger 2011).

The fourth process, *signifying*, uses the brand as an indicator that may be used to gain information, supplement an identity, or

represent a group (Schmitt 2011). The fifth and final process is *connecting*, which allows the consumer to associate a brand attitude, brand attachment, and brand community (Schmitt 2011). Brand attachment is often considered the true identifier of a loyal consumer, making it one of the most important concepts of consumer-brand engagement (Schmitt 2011).

Importance of the Actual and Ideal Self

Through research studies and observations, marketers have established the impact of self-concept on branding and consumer behavior. "Self-concept is viewed as the sum of an individual's thoughts and feelings about him or herself with respect to others" (Onkvisit & Shaw, 1987 as cited in Choi & Rifon 2012). Within this psychological spectrum of self-concept, two separate divisions of one's self have been established. "The *actual self*, refers to how a person actually perceives him or herself, whereas *ideal self*, refers to how a person would like to perceive him or herself" (640 Choi & Rifon 2012). In fact, previous studies have provided ample evidence for the theory suggesting that people purchase and consume products congruent with their self-concept, either actual or ideal (Sirgy 1985 as cited in Choi & Rifon 2012).

Actual vs. Ideal Self

Companies are now aware of the importance of the perception of a consumer's self-concept, especially the relevance between their product and the values of either the actual or ideal self. There have been numerous promotional tactics implemented within product campaigns in order to test and measure the balance, or imbalance, between the company and consumer. Brands, and the products they represent, are used as a way for consumers to define and express themselves (Malar, Krohmer, Hoyer, & Nyffenegger

2011). “Individuals are cognizant of not only what they are, but also of what they wish to be” (55 Hong & Zinkhan 1995). They form a perceptual reality of what they aspire to be, and then try to match their reality of actual self with the imagination of the ideal self (Hong & Zinkhan 1995).

The Impact of Self-Congruence

In order for companies to achieve and maintain loyal consumer relationships, they must make sure there is a match between the consumer’s self and the brand’s personality, otherwise known as self-congruence (Malar, Krohmer, Hoyer & Nyffenegger 2011). Several studies have shown that companies should not underestimate the power of self-congruence due to its significant impact of consumer behavior. Self-congruence is necessary to achieve positive brand attachment and consistency over a long period of time. If executed correctly, a brand can generate feelings that will differentiate itself from any competitor on the market and create an attachment with the consumer (Malar, Krohmer, Hoyer & Nyffenegger 2011). This theory can be described as an ‘evoked set’ of brands, representing an exclusive group of brands that the consumer can identify with.

Consumer Involvement and Self-Esteem

In order to achieve this state of emotional brand attachment through consumer self-congruence, there must also be a certain level of product involvement, self-esteem, and public self-consciousness (Malar, Krohmer, Hoyer & Nyffenegger 2011). In accordance with these three variables, a brand must also evoke feelings of affection, passion, and connection in order to get the consumer’s attention. Product involvement is crucial when analyzing consumer behavior because it determines the degree of personal relevance

the brand has in the consumer’s life. The advertised product must have some meaning or importance in the life of the consumer in order to break through the clutter and trigger a sense of desire or action. Sometimes coinciding with the actual vs. ideal self-concept comes an understanding and evaluation of a consumer’s worthiness—otherwise known as self-esteem (Malar, Krohmer, Hoyer & Nyffenegger 2011). As human beings, we strive to maintain and enhance our self-esteem by consuming brands that are congruent with our own self-views and schemas.

Consumer Response Variables

Consumers are exposed to countless brands through various forms of advertisements each and every day. But how many of these are relevant to the consumer’s self-concept and do they actually stay in the consumer’s mind when they are faced with a purchasing decision? There have been multiple studies that show the different effects promotional endorsements and visual perspectives can have on self-concept and purchase intention.

Celebrity Endorsements

In today’s world of advertising and sales promotions, there is rarely a product that is not being endorsed by a celebrity, athlete, or public figure. Due to their wide recognition and popularity, companies choose to use celebrities in their advertisements in order to create a set of connections – between celebrity and product, between consumer and celebrity, and between consumer and product. The idea behind using a celebrity, strives to achieve the congruence between the consumer’s perception of the celebrity and his or her own ideal self-concept (Choi & Rifon 2012). Companies cannot just choose any celebrity to, essentially, be the *face* of their brand. They need to make their

selection while keeping expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness in mind (Choi & Rifon 2012). “Expertise is the extent to which a communicator is perceived to be a source of valid assertions, stemming from any knowledge or training the spokesperson possesses in the related field. Trustworthiness refers to the audience’s confidence in the source for providing information in an objective and honest manner. Attractiveness is related to how likeable or physically appealing the source is to the audience” (640 Choi & Rifon 2012). The majority of the time, consumers set their ideal self-concept equal to a celebrity’s; therefore, they are motivated to reach a condition where their actual self matches their ideal self (Choi & Rifon 2012).

A recent study conducted in 2012 measured the impact of celebrity endorsement in a set of advertisements. Subjects were given four full-page, black and white print advertisements with Julia Roberts and Drew Barrymore endorsing a perfume and a technology-related product. The experiment yielded results that evaluated the consumer-product connection and their level of attachment to the brand. The advertisement created a positive result when the consumer had similar characteristics of their ideal self and the featured celebrity. In addition, the more relevant the product was to the celebrity endorsing it, the more effective the advertisement connection was. (Choi & Rifon 2012)

Visual Perspectives

Although it is evident that nothing is more important than the consumer experience, there is still much to be said about the potential experience. Relating to the idea of a consumer having both an ideal and actual self-concept, he or she can also have a different brand experience as a result of changing visual perspectives in

advertisements. The ability to “imagine oneself in the scene” is a process of self-imagery and cognitive association that may affect judgments of products or purchase behavior (Jiang, Adaval, Steinhart & Wyer Jr. 2014). The ability to allow the consumer to imagine an experience can be used as a powerful persuasion tool when creating advertisements. “However, there are some moderators that have been identified, including the type of information on which imagery is based, the ease with which the images can be generated, the extent to which one incorporates oneself into the imagery, and the perspective one takes while generating images” (419 Jiang, Adaval, Steinhart & Wyer Jr. 2014). Self-imagery in advertising can force a consumer to form a story with the acquired information by imagining him or herself in the scene, or he or she can imagine him or herself experiencing the different aspects but not actually linking them together in a narrative (Jiang, Adaval, Steinhart & Wyer Jr. 2014). A shift in the perspective can hinder consumer comprehension, and inadvertently, skew purchase behavior for the future.

Memory, Preference, and Purchase Intention

Knowing that consumers generally associate themselves with celebrities that possess similar self-concept ideals, does the same go for all advertised brands? To some extent...the answer is yes. In a study cited in the article, “Self-Concept and Advertising Effectiveness: The Influence of Congruency, Conspicuousness, and Response Mode” by Hong and Zinkhan, it was proven that a consumer’s self-concept has a measurable influence on advertisements and the symbolic approaches to brand recognition. The results of the study concluded that recall and recognition of the brand was not influenced by the congruence between self-concept and the product being advertised

(Hong & Zinkhan 1995). Instead, the study yielded results supporting two theories: (a) consumers want to express themselves through brands and will often show favorable preference to those that are compatible with their self-image, and (b) consumers will be more inclined to purchase a product if the attitude and use of the brand is relevant to their actual and ideal self-concept (Hong & Zinkhan 1995). There must be relevance and compatibility with brands in order to create any interest or desire within the consumer.

Conclusion

The cognitive framework that encompasses the mind of the consumer is very complex and difficult to comprehend but essential to brand congruity. The way consumers visualize their own self-concept, as actual and ideal self, carries a heavy influence in their brand association and purchase behavior. Companies should utilize different promotional tactics in their advertisements such as celebrity endorsements and visual perspectives but be aware of the possible consequences if not executed correctly. A brand must position itself within the consumer's self-concept in order to achieve attachment and congruence.

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