Meeting the challenge of the postmodern consumer

Since the second world war, brands have gone through three stages of evolution. First came classic brands. These typically positioned themselves as helping buyers to achieve simple goals such as cleaner clothes. Next came contemporary brands, which enabled consumers to attain additional goals – cleaner clothes without harming the environment, say. Finally, say Gregory Carpenter and Alice Tybout, we have entered an era of postmodern brands, in which time-starved consumers strive to attain a greater range of goals than ever before. Successful brands will be those that enable consumers to achieve many goals simultaneously, reconcile conflicting goals or satisfy neglected needs.

The evolution of branding

As buyers, we seek to achieve the goals that motivate us. To achieve many of those goals, we turn to brands. The role of brands with respect to consumers’ goals, however, has evolved, as have the goals themselves. These changes are sketched below.

Classic brands

After the second world war, consumers turned their attention to their personal lives. While many factors, including mass production and television, facilitated the building of mass-market brands, the general concept of branding succeeded because it was compatible with goals that were widely shared at the time.

Consumers were anxious both to achieve and to belong. Branded products signified that one had the economic means to purchase goods produced to consistently high standards, simplified decision making and provided a common bond with others in the community.

This era produced many “classic” brands. These brands were typically linked to a single buyer goal. Coca-Cola, for example, was clearly targeted at a specific buyer goal. However, in the late 20th century, brands began to acquire a broader perspective on the needs of consumers.

Contemporary brands

With basic functional needs met, buyers turned to a wider range of goals. While all consumers expect detergents to clean clothes, some value detergents that do so as efficiently as possible, whereas others search for detergents that are environmentally friendly.

Recognising this development, brand managers segmented markets according to the benefits buyers seek. A benefit segmentation produces markedly successful “contemporary” brands. These brands, broader than classic brands, are built around functionality and associated benefits.

Volvo cars, for example, most certainly serve the basic transportation function associated with motor vehicles. But the Volvo brand does not just stand for reliable transportation. Volvo is the car for those who seek out consumers for whom the protection of self and family is a primary concern.

The link between Volvo and the self and family preservation the goal has been carefully built over time. Consumers have been educated about the reinforced steel beams in the car’s roof and side panels that protect the driver and passengers. The association with family security is further supported by the car’s boxy styling. Advertisements feature crash survivors who testify to their belief that their Volvos saved their lives. As a result, consumers for whom family security is important are more likely to buy a Volvo, much as those who seek high performance and status are likely to be drawn to a BMW.

Apple, the computer manufacturer, also practised this contemporary approach to brand building and effectively challenged IBM’s market position for many years. Apple focused not on processing power, which was IBM’s strength, but on ease of use. This benefit connected with consumers’ goals of achievement and independence.

Postmodern brands

The “postmodern” buyer presents a serious challenge to classic and contemporary brands. Volvo’s US sales have suffered as safety features have become standard on most cars. Apple is struggling to reconnect with consumers who have succumbed to the dominance of Microsoft for the sake of convenience (because of extensive systems support and software availability, for example). While some companies, such as Gillette, continue to grow by continually raising the standard of product performance with respect to a single benefit, for example, ever-closer shaving, it is also obvious that the contemporary approach to brand building offers no guarantee of success with postmodern buyers.

Postmodern buyers seek to use brands to attain a remarkable breadth of goals – much broader than contemporary consumers’ goals set. This larger array of goals is, in part, a reflection of the Working parents, for example, play two obvious roles. Depending on the circumstances, they might have a burning desire to “do more with less” or they might have a burning desire to “do more with more.” Eliminating positions without eliminating the work done by them. Specialists have been replaced with generalists. Working fathers are playing more active family roles and working mothers are pursuing more active careers.

Some of the goals we seek are timeless – achievement, good health, love, membership in a larger community, intellectual stimulation, spirituality, recognition, freedom, responsibility. Others reflect our changing lives: status, convenience, stress reduction. And the particular postmodern buyer is the one who will profit the most from brands that meet the needs of time-starved consumers. As a result, consumers are likely to be drawn to brands such as Volvo, whose focus is on reliability and safety.

In short, the postmodern consumer has become the dominant force in the marketplace and brands must adapt to meet their needs. On a final note, the postmodern consumer is the one who will profit the most from brands that meet the needs of time-starved consumers. As a result, consumers are likely to be drawn to brands such as Volvo, whose focus is on reliability and safety.
to focus on achievement in the workplace while remaining connected to loved ones (or vice versa), have also gained widespread consumer use. However, to date, these responses to time famine have produced high-growth product categories rather than strong brands.

In less technology-intensive markets, some brands have delivered multiple goals with considerable success. Consider the example of Waterman pens noted earlier. The company's success in marketing high-end pens is, in part, attributable to the fact that these products are not only for the single goal - status - that is typically associated with luxury items but to multiple goals. Yes, the pen's high price undoubtedly conveys status, but membership in the elite club of successful people it is not merely self-focused consumption. The pen is of heirloom quality and can thus serve as a conversation piece among friends.

Resolve goal conflict

An alternative strategy for postmodern brands is to reconcile seemingly conflicting goals. Levi's Dockers brand illustrates this point. Levi's actively encouraged and helped some companies implement the concept of "round Fridays," on which workers could work late and wear more casual attire. Levi's motivation for this strategy is obvious: to accommodate the "casual Fridays" men would wear the Levi's Dockers that they normally wore only on weekends and sales of Dockers would increase dramatically. The reason, which would have been unlikely to succeed a decade earlier, worked as it improved the sense that the longer hours they required conflicted with employees' goals of relaxing and expressing themselves. Wearing casual clothes at the office is one means of blurring the line between business and leisure, thereby integrating these goals.

Similarly, an important element in the successful repositioning of Sears, the US retailer, was the recognition of the goal conflict and role strain experienced by many homemakers over Christmas. On the one hand, the Christmas holiday season is an ideal occasion for achieving goals that revolve around family and friends. At the same time, meet the expectations of these significant others is not an easy task. As a result, the homemaker may actually spend little time relating to loved ones and feel disappointed and worn down. Sears, with its broad selection of merchandise, has positioned itself as a haven for the home- maker time that might otherwise be spent running from store to store. It thereby enables its customers to achieve their goals.

The desire for autonomy and adventure has helped to fuel the rapid growth of sales of sports-utility vehicles, such as Land Rover and Jeep.

Conclusion

Sophisticated, time-pressured postmodern consumers respond to brands that address the goal-management challenges they face. They seek brands that allow them to pursue multiple goals at the same time. Brands are evolving to reflect this new reality. Volvo is expanding its traditional safety-focused positioning to encompass goals of individuality and self-expression. Yet, as we are now told, not only to protect the physical person, they also contribute to one's psychological well-being by enabling escape to remote, pristine settings.

Consumers also respond to brands that offer "extreme" consumption experiences, thereby compensating for the relative neglect of an important goal. Thus brands associated with self-indulgence, such as Haagen-Dasz ice cream and Starbucks coffee, have also enjoyed healthy sales.

However, the goal-focused consumer also presents special challenges to the brand manager. When purchases are driven more by abstract goals than by functional product properties, the nature of competition can be difficult to understand and it can shift - sometimes all too quickly.

A competitor is any brand that satisfies some of the same goals. This presents both opportunities and threats. On the positive side, this broader market definition expands a brand's potential market. Thus Waterman pens may attempt to capture money that might otherwise be spent on jewellery or art. Further, the definition implies that brand extensions should be guided by a brand's link to goals rather than by similarity in product features. Leather clothing has few features in common with motorcycles but the Harley-Davidson name on both types of product makes good sense to the consuming public.

At the same time, competition across categories expands the set of potential competitors and increases the uncertainty about how those competitors will behave. Waterman, for example, is likely to have a lower understanding of the economics and likely strategies of art dealers and jewelers than of other pen manufacturers. The nature of which is increasingly focused on underlying, enduring consumer goals rather than on the physical products they sell is not a new one. It is at the heart of the marketing concept. What is new is that the nature of brands, like the people who consume them, is changing in fundamental ways. The postmodern consumer plays multiple roles and has a wide variety of goals and little time to achieve them. While these changes threaten some brands, those that rise to the challenge are likely to reap substantial rewards because buyers need brands now more than ever.

### Contents

Meeting the challenge of the postmodern consumer

Brands today must serve the needs of consumers with multiple goals and little time, say Gregory Carpenter and Alice Tybout. Pages 2-3

Brand strategies and consumer behaviour

Barbara Kahn outlines strategies that brand managers are using to appeal to the supermarket shopper. Pages 4-6

Brand equity and line extension: how low can you go?

David Reibstein, Karl Ulrich and Taylor Randall explain when product line extensions call for new brands. Pages 7-8

SKUs: taking stock of more than brands

Peter Fader and Bruce Hardie explain the benefits of modelling how consumers choose among stock-keeping units. Pages 8-9

How consumers cope with information overload

Barbara Kahn describes the strategies that consumers use to process product information. Pages 10-11

More advice on retaining customers is part of "Marketing to Age". Cover illustration: Daniel Macie