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A brand is not a logo

Many people in today's increasingly competitive market-place are confused as to what a brand is. What is a brand? What is a logo? Some people think that the words logo and brand are interchangeable. Clients talk about updating or creating a new logo for their business or product when, in fact, what they actually need is a brand appraisal.

A brand is a total experience – a collection of perceptions in the eyes of a consumer. It is not a logo or a name, nor is it a product or a service – though all can contribute to creating a brand. However, when used effectively, a logo will help make a brand top-of-mind when thinking of a product or service.

Confused yet? What brands do you first think of when someone says pizza, petrol or supermarket? The brand that first springs to mind will likely be one that communicates clearly and convincingly – even though you may not personally support it. For me, I first think of Hell Pizza, BP and New World. Personally I don't buy pizza, but I do have a Shell card (soon to change to Greenstone), and I shop at our local New World.

The brand choices you make will be for a range of reasons, not just because they're the most recognised or remembered. You can, after all, be recognised and remembered for all the wrong reasons. Consumer choices are made because of convenience, affordability, availability and for people's personal preferences. Perhaps the brand has a good environmental message, has award-winning products, a great

retail environment, friendly staff or even all of the above? There are many influences that will affect the buying decision and they are all important. When buying a car, there are many rational decisions for you to make. For example, if you're looking for reliability and cost-effectiveness, a Honda, Ford or Toyota may be the first brands that spring to your mind. But for

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me, personally, I didn't want any of these cars. Not because they wouldn't be an excellent choice – indeed most mechanics would tell me they are. But these brands 'aren't me'. I chose my current, elderly Citroen CX, not because of its distinctive chevron logo but because I have, from childhood, bought into the

design principles represented by that brand. From my first Citroen experience almost fifty years ago, when my Uncle Jim came to visit us in his new space age Citroen, I was sold. When you turned the engine on, the Citroen rose up off its haunches ready to go. It was alive. It looked like no other car. To me it was beautiful. It was exciting. It was so very different from our old Austin and so special that I wanted my Dad to buy one immediately. The brand had emotionally hooked me. It was the future. Well, mine at least! That doesn't mean that my love for Citroen is totally blind, although I am now on my eighth model. There was a time when Citroen's brand attributes were compromised with the aim of gaining wider market share, principally in the UK where British mechanics – like many in New Zealand – were suspicious of anything that wasn't conventional. What had been an adventurous engineering and design-led organization, changed direction to a less avant-garde and more conservative approach – hoping to give Citroen more mass-market appeal. Many car brands in the eighties and early nineties, Citroen amongst them, lost

distinctiveness by listening to too much market research. The effect of this, of course, was to actually test the loyalty of some of their long-term customers. Thankfully, this was eventually recognised when the research-based, 'blanding down' of car design actually confused buyers. Personally I don't understand why anyone would buy something that is boring. Thank goodness we are all different.

Existing customers

Generally, in the retail sector, your most valuable customers are your existing customers. When planning how you market your services or products, always consider your existing customers first. You will likely want to grow your business; most of us do, so you can always learn from your existing clients. What does your experience tell you? Why would customers choose to shop with you? Why do they choose your brand? Is it the brand personality, the price, your distinctive product, convenience? Or even all of the above?

Obviously with new brands you can't ask these questions so you will need to do more research to get an understanding of the

opportunities. Research doesn't necessarily mean commissioned research. You might do it yourself by talking to potential customers. What does your experience tell you? What is the most effective way to talk to these people? Who or what will be competing for the same dollar?

Sometimes your competition won't be what you may expect. In the last couple of tough economic years, fast food sales are up. It's not cheaper to buy fast food; however, people are apparently skimping on many of the things they would normally like to spend money on – such as new clothes, holidays and restaurant meals – and then rewarding themselves with a little fast-food treat. That is the theory. The fast-food brands are very skilled at keeping their brands working in any market. Kentucky Fried Chicken became KFC when fried food became unfashionable and a real health issue in people's minds. They didn't stop making fried chicken;

they just stopped calling it fried chicken! Today, it's cooked chicken. McDonald's continue to work on their menus to stay in-tune with public perceptions. Salads, WeightWatchers endorsements, wraps and premium Angus Beef burgers all help to keep the brand alive and successful. So, what creates a great shopping experience and drives customer loyalty?

Brand experience

This covers many influences and actions and these all combine to create customer loyalty, if well executed.

Engagement

This is the personal interaction. Was it polite, was genuine interest shown, was your customer listened to and assisted?

Helpful

Did you give good advice, did you help your customer find what they were looking for or even something that they hadn't thought of, but, was a great

choice? Was your product knowledge good? Did you go the extra mile?

Brand and environment

How do your customers recognise the brand? Do you advertise, does the store look great, is it an enjoyable place to shop, do you feel that you are giving a good deal and do you make your customers feel special?

Systems

Do customers have to queue? Is their shopping process easy and professionally executed?

Problem recovery

When there is a problem, do you resolve the situation and ensure customer satisfaction?

Customer perception

For retailers, the 'brand' is made up of both the brand image of the products being sold and how the store environment is presented. It is whether you can deliver it in a timely and consistent manner. What is your policy on returns and exchanges? How easy is it to find

parking? What are the attitudes of your employees and how do they present themselves? For retailers, the in-store experience is the brand. Any slip-up in service and customer experience is felt and remembered. The value of a product brand comes down to the customers' perceptions of the quality and desirability of that item. With a retail brand, the product value is only one part of an overall experience for the customer. When done well, this allows the company to charge a price premium because strong retail brands can tie their customers to them – emotionally. The best retail brands have the loyalty of their customers, an authentic story and, above all else, are clearly differentiated in the market. They are a brand. ■

□ By **Fraser Gardyne**, partner at GardyneHolt – one of New Zealand's leading design agencies with clients and services in Auckland, Bangkok and Shanghai. For more information, go to: www.gardyneholt.co.nz.

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