Keynote article

An evolved definition of the term ‘brand’: Why branding has a branding problem

Received (in revised form): 25th February, 2013

CASEY JONES
is a 20-year veteran of the global marketing field. Co-founder of BriefLogic, and a former vice president of global marketing at Dell, he has also served as chief strategy officer for the global technology practice of McCann Worldgroup, working with clients that included all of Microsoft’s business groups as well as Intel and HP.

DANIEL BONEVAC
is co-founder of BriefLogic and Professor of Philosophy at the University of Texas, where he has been Chair of the Department of Philosophy for ten years. He is author of five books and editor or co-editor of four others, and has written 60 articles for professional journals.

Abstract
‘Branding’ has a branding problem. There is no consensus about how to define ‘brand’. Existing definitions are surveyed, they are argued to be inadequate, and new definitions are proposed. The definition of ‘brand’ is best understood as being synonymous with the term ‘definition’. The authors’ conception provides an analysis of a two-stage process for establishing a brand, shows why differentiation is essential to branding, and explains why branding provides the key to messaging strategy.

Keywords
brand, branding, definition of brand, definition of branding, meaning of brand, meaning of branding

INTRODUCTION
Within the corridors of corporate power, no horizontal function is less well understood than marketing, and in particular, ‘branding’. In comparison with financial principles, supply-chain optimisation, operations, or even human resources, neither the chief executive officer (CEO), nor the chairman, nor board of directors to whom the CEO reports has a clear understanding of the basic concept of what a ‘brand’ is, of ‘branding’, or of ‘brand building’. Financial analysts, investors, economists, as well as partners and associates of the consulting firms on whom business leaders depend, most often describe markets precisely, but see marketing as ‘fuzzy’. Even when the subject may be vital to the health or viability of a company, they see branding as non-strategic. Often it plays no part at all in their financial or strategic decisions. This is due, in part, to placement of responsibility for branding within the marketing function. This paper will show why that is a mistake. Even within the communications function of marketing, which along with product, placement, and pricing make up what can be labelled the four ‘Ps’, there is no consensus regarding how to define the term ‘brand’ or any of its derivative forms. In short, the decision makers who control the budgets and make or endorse all final decisions that have
WHY BRANDING HAS A BRANDING PROBLEM

an impact on brands do not understand the very term; they cannot Bing it, Google it, or Ask Jeeves about it without becoming more, rather than less confused about the definitions of the basic terms. If they ask their marketing teams, agency leads or consultants, the answers they receive will be so varied that if they persist in seeking clarification, they will conclude that, as a whole, the branding experts cannot be relied upon. It is no surprise that they often have little faith that experts’ recommendations will yield desired outcomes.

In short, branding has a brand problem. This is incredibly ironic when most branding is viewed as a communications function. Experts in the field are failing to communicate. This paper will show that the root of this problem is in the very definition of the term ‘brand’, and in the same way that branding experts recommend a single-minded vision for brands, will recommend a single-minded vision for how the term can be defined, understood clearly in a marketing context, and more importantly, understood as the most effective strategy for explaining it to peers in business, in academia, and even the contentious worlds of political and ideological debate.

BASIC PRINCIPLES

Establishing and strengthening brands for companies and products is arguably a marketer’s most important job. It affects not only current dispositions toward products but also the credibility of all future messages. Brands are important because they should govern what people think of a marketer, a company, its products, its services, and its marketing communications. The brand, in other words, if clearly defined, affects everything the company says, does and sells. It affects its own ability to shape its future, for it establishes or undermines its credibility.

In the narrowest sense, a brand has been conceived as a name, a graphic image, or a combination of both. It is easily understood as a single word or set of words, and perhaps a logo which is unique to an individual, a company or a cause. How much is a brand worth? Consider a choice between every property and franchise — all the bricks and mortar — currently owned by McDonald’s but without the name, or the name without the bricks and mortar. Which should one choose? Substitute any other prominent brand — Coke, Pepsi, Toyota — for McDonald’s to get a similar thought experiment. In each case, there is an argument for taking the brand name. That in itself suggests that the value of the name of each of these companies or products, together with what it symbolises, is worth as much or more than all their tangible assets combined.

Unfortunately, beyond this basic ‘name-logo’ definition, almost no-one knows what a brand is. The concept of a brand may be the central concept of marketing. However, when the present authors asked over 1,000 professionals to define ‘brand’, the results were astonishingly varied, confirming the results of de Chematony and Riley, who found 12 different kinds of definition of brand in the literature and in the responses of senior consultants in advertising agencies. Only two of the kinds were mentioned by even half of the experts they surveyed; the median definition was mentioned by only 20 per cent. The lack of consensus about what brands are poses serious problems for marketing professionals. It makes it hard for them to maintain and communicate a clear vision of their task. That, in turn, makes it hard for them to maintain the support of senior management. It makes
it hard for them to design, implement and evaluate marketing campaigns. It also makes it hard for agencies and companies to communicate, generating needless opportunities for confusion and conflict. In response to this lack of clarity, many have despaired of the lack of consensus and some have even begun talking of a ‘brand bubble’.

Confusion about what brands are extends to a variety of other critical issues: How are brands created? Strengthened? Weakened? Destroyed? How can value be added to brands? How and why do people identify with brands?

The goal of this paper is to offer a precise definition of ‘brand’. It is hoped to achieve more than adding one more definition to a field that already has too many. This definition explains the appeal of other definitions, but also explains why they fall short. It specifies clearly what branding is, and why it is important. Furthermore, most importantly, it provides a foundation for seeing how to do it.

**SOME IMPLAUSIBLE DEFINITIONS**

Most definitions of brand found in the literature and in the responses of marketing professionals fail as definitions, although they may specify things that are true of brands. They are mentioned here to set them aside.

- **Brands as risk reducers.** Brands can reduce risk by giving consumers confidence that they know what they are getting and by establishing presumptions of quality. However, this does not define ‘brand’. Hiring a good accountant also reduces risk, but good accountants are not brands. Brands can also become negative, increasing risk by undermining confidence: think Edsel.

- **Brands as evolving.** Brands do evolve in response to corporate actions, marketing campaigns, consumer experience with products, changing consumer preferences, and alterations in the competitive landscape. But biological species, musical styles, hairdos and fashions also evolve, and they are not brands.

- **Brands as adding value.** A good brand does add value to a company or product. However, a bad brand can take value away from it. Furthermore, many things that add value — an improved economic outlook, a technological innovation, a favourable change in tax laws or trade policies, or a wise acquisition, for example — are not brands.

- **Brands as trademarks.** Branding connects with certain legal issues, but people who start a successful business and develop a fine reputation have surely established a brand whether or not they have sought proper legal protection for their names, logos and products. Conversely, obtaining a trademark, copyright, or other legal protection hardly constitutes establishing a brand.

- **Brands as value systems.** Marketing professionals surveyed mentioned this definition more frequently than any other. Certainly, a brand may convey important information about a company’s values or the values that a product might promote or serve. It may offer a basis for a consumer’s valuing of the product. As a definition, however, this is clearly inadequate. Laws, moral codes and societal norms may rest on or express value systems; they do not thereby rest on or express brands. Brands, moreover, frequently allow consumers to identify products or companies without conveying any system of values.

- **Brands as relationships.** People may relate to brands, and brands had better relate to people if they are to be effective. An ineffective brand, however, is
still a brand, even if no one relates to it. Moreover, people relate to many other things, which are not thereby brands.

- **Brands as messages**: An effective brand may convey a message, but brands cannot be defined as messages. A message that the company will release its quarterly earnings report on Thursday is not a brand. This is true even for messages with some emotional impact. A product recall notice may affect a brand, but it is not itself a brand.

### MORE PLAUSSIBLE DEFINITIONS

#### Brands as signs or logos

The American Marketing Association characterises a brand as ‘a name, term, sign, symbol or design, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods or services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors’. This reflects the origin of the term as an identifying mark. According to this definition, ‘Coke’ — the word — is Coke’s brand; ‘McDonald’s’ is McDonald’s’ brand; and so on. If this is so, it is hard to see what ‘establishing a brand’, ‘strengthening a brand’, etc, could mean. Once someone has introduced the name of a company or product, they are done.

A name, sign, symbol or logo, moreover, seems neither necessary nor sufficient for having a brand. A Korean barbecue food truck on the corner might build a brand without any of these, being known simply as ‘that food truck on the corner’. Likewise, someone might open a store, call it ‘Pat’s’, and emblazon it with a fancy logo without establishing a brand.

It is worth pausing to see why. ‘Pat’s’ indicates nothing about what the store is. It conveys no information about the kind of store it is, the category of products that it sells, or what makes it different from any other store.

#### Brands as promises or contracts

Defining brands as promises is especially popular among marketing professionals: ‘Brands are promises that consumers believe in’. But promising is neither necessary nor sufficient for branding. ‘If you click here, you’ll learn how to save money on car insurance’. That is a promise. But it is not a brand. Conversely, Coke’s being a soft drink is surely part of the brand. But being a soft drink is not a promise. In fact, it is hard to identify the content of the promise of most major brands. Coke? Panasonic? Chrysler? Nokia?

This is not to say that a promise cannot be an aspect of a brand. Maybe a promise of customer satisfaction is even implicit in every brand. But, again, apart from the category of good or service under consideration, or what differentiates it from competitors, such a promise has little content, and does nothing to distinguish one brand from another.

Marketers, moreover, often speak of brand promises. But if brands are promises, that is redundant: it is like saying, ‘promise promises’. A promise may be something a brand makes, but it is not itself the brand.

#### Brands as images or personalities

David Ogilvy, reflecting the classic approach of Gardner and Levy, speaks of images and personalities.

It must now be decided what ‘image’ is wanted for a brand. Image means personality. Products, like people, have personalities, and they can make or break them in the market place. The personality of a product is an amalgam of many things — its
name, its packaging, its price, the style of its advertising, and, above all, the nature of the product itself.

There is something plainly right about this. It does not admit of any quick refutation. But it does face two problems in addition to the need to define image and personality carefully.

First, brands, understood in this way, do not relate very directly to reasons to buy. They do not offer much guidance about the content of marketing messages. Creating a consistent and attractive image for a product is important, but it is not sufficient. People have to have a reason to buy the product.

Secondly, this definition, like definitions of brands as identities, mashes together two very different approaches to understand what brands are. Images are subjective. They exist in the minds of customers. Personalities are objective; they exist in the object. Your image is not your personality. The two are of course related, but they are not the same thing. People can be misunderstood. Scoundrels are sometimes popular, and the virtuous are sometimes despised. Just so, a company may do everything right and still, through misfortune, have a negative image. A product can be deeply flawed and nevertheless enjoy a good reputation — for a while.

**Brands as (shorthands for) perceptions**

Suppose the subjective route is chosen, and a brand thought of as existing in the minds of potential customers. Furthermore, suppose there is an effort to make more precise the notion of an image. A brand might end up as being defined as the total of people’s perceptions of something. The objects of perceptions can be products, services, concepts, theories, ideologies, candidates, nations, institutions or people themselves. A brand, on this view, exists only in the hearts and minds of the people in the audience. It is important to speak of hearts and minds here, for a brand, like any other definition, meaning or concept, has both cognitive and emotional components, and potentially carries great credibility.

This conception of brands has a counterintuitive consequence: every interaction between product and customer affects the brand. Still, the brand consists of such a large set of perceptions that it tends to remain relatively stable over time.

Brands, so understood, can be influenced by marketers, but two things about them are vital to be understood.

First, a brand, so understood, is owned by the audience. They determine its value. It lives in their hearts and minds, and not on a piece of paper in an office or an artistic rendition of a logo, company or product name. A brand name, like a logo, means only what one can persuade someone to believe, think, and feel about it. A marketer, a CEO, fellow employees and a board are audiences that may have some agreement on what a brand means to them and how much they value it. That meaning is almost never the same as the intended audience’s perception. Their relation to the object differs from that of the audience.

Secondly, pre-commoditisation, the primary source of brand perception is the merit of the product. Does it deliver at above or below the expectation of the audience? Ogilvy was on to something in talking about the brand as including ‘the nature of the product’. There is often conflict between ‘brand stewards’, including marketers, brand managers, agencies, product engineers and designers on the one hand, and managers on the other. Only after a brand becomes completely commoditised — only after there is a
WHY BRANDING HAS A BRANDING PROBLEM

A multitude of options, all of which deliver exactly the same functional and emotional benefits — does perception alone become the primary driver of branding. A purely subjective understanding of a brand makes sense only at that advanced stage, and takes for granted the understanding of the nature of the product that is the primary content of the brand at earlier stages. Unless marketers understand and appreciate that their roles are complementary to teammates’ roles on the product side, they may fail to see that a brand is developed in an interdependent partnership with product development. Neither group alone can claim complete responsibility for its health, success or failure.

Great brands are built by teams that include marketers. A marketer’s success is often assured by a great product. As the human mind nearly always assumes that correlation equals causation, many ‘great’ marketers have had their reputations made because of association with great products. The converse is also true. Marketers are often blamed for brand failure, when in fact the product itself has failed — failed to deliver equivalent or higher value than competing products, or failed to be relevant in a world that has evolved beyond its usefulness.

There is something right, then, in the purely subjective account, but also something wrong. Brands and perceptions are intimately linked. Perception determines action. But perception does not float free from reality. Brands are built on the merit of the product. The nature and quality of the product matters. Marketing is not magic. If you want to pull a rabbit out of a hat, it helps to have a rabbit.

So, what is a brand? A name? A promise? An image? A personality? A set of perceptions? Some combination of these? Or something else altogether?

BRANDS ARE DEFINITIONS

Brands are definitions. A brand is not merely a name. It is close to the truth, but not quite right, to say that it is what a name means. Names are labels; they do not have meanings in the way other words do. But a brand can be, and typically is, communicated by a name. Jean-Noel Kapferer comes close in holding that a brand “is the product’s essence, its meaning, and its direction, and it defines its identity in time and space.”36 This is expansive, and also imprecise, as essence, meaning, direction and identity are not the same thing.

The present authors’ definition is more precise, and makes it easier to see how brands are built, strengthened, weakened, and destroyed:

A brand is a definition of a particular company or product.

In the same sense that definitions of words and terms help give meaning to those words and terms, brands give meaning to names, logos, etc. They are capable of conveying promises, images, personalities, status, emotional characteristics and subjective qualities. In short, they are capable of doing everything that the above authors take brands to do. But they do not consist in any of those things.

The chief advantage of this definition goes beyond clarity. Definitions, unlike promises, images, personalities and the like, have a definite and well-understood structure in science, business, politics, discourse and academia. Treating brands as definitions provides a way of understanding them and developing a general model of them.

What is branding? Essentially, it is defining. To establish a brand, it is essential to establish a definition. What is a definition?
Aristotle offered an account that can be put, in modern terms, in a helpful equation:

\[ \text{Brand} = \text{Category} + \text{Differences} \]

To define something, in other words, is to place it in a more general category and then indicate how it differs from other things in that category. This gives a straightforward, two-stage analysis of how to establish a brand. Establish its category; differentiate it.

**Categories**

Branding requires one to locate oneself in the proper category. To do this, it is essential to establish awareness and identification of the brand. People have to know that you and your product exist. And they have to be able to identify the general kind of company you are, or the general kind of thing your product is. This requires understanding your mission. You have to know what business you are in, and communicate this to your audience.

To locate oneself in the proper category, first, establish that category. Sometimes, this is easy; there is already a well-established category. It is possible to locate oneself by using that category or making a comparison with other brands already located there. Introducing itself to the US market, for example, Kia did not have to explain what a car was; it simply had to make it clear that a Kia is a car.

Sometimes, however, the category needs to be defined. Your mission or product may truly be new. Who are you? What is your product? In introducing the iPod, Apple was creating a new category, and needed to explain the category as well as locate the product in it. Companies or products whose names become emblematic of an entire category — Xerox, Kleenex, etc — tend to be those that introduced a new category. As economists, investment bankers and venture capitalists are fond of saying, ‘first to market’ is a huge advantage.

Establishing the category for a company brand requires specifying the company mission. Establishing it for a product brand requires specifying the product’s core use. In either case, the category is tied to a set of purposes that the company or product is trying to achieve.

**Differentiation**

Branding as an activity also requires differentiating oneself from the rest of the things in that category. What are your distinguishing characteristics? What makes the brand, company or product unique? How does it differ from its competitors? Establishing these points not only gives the brand clear meaning, it builds a case for the support, investment or purchase of the brand.

Placing oneself in the proper category requires understanding one’s company, product, mission and the product’s core purpose. These are not trivial things to understand. Nevertheless, they are easy compared with differentiating oneself from other things in one’s category. How does one establish uniqueness in a field of similar companies and products? This involves positioning, but it may involve much more. Promises, images, personalities, emotional characteristics, social characteristics, and various other objective and subjective qualities may distinguish a company or product from its competition.

Differences are a key — actually, the key — to building a case for a product, service, personal or ideological brand. Remember the link between categories...
and purposes. To understand what the product is, is also to recognise its purpose, and thus a reason for buying it. But that reason, while important, is shared by every other product in the category. It is a reason not just for buying your product, but also for buying your competitor’s. It is a reason, in other words, for buying your product or something like it. Building a case for your product in particular depends on how your product differs from the other things in its category.

**Cases depend on differences**

I can persuade you to buy my product instead of my competitors’ by showing how my product differs from theirs and why that ought to matter to you. Differences are thus the key to persuasion. Why buy this product? Why subscribe to this service? Why believe in this cause? Why vote for that candidate? It depends on what differentiates them from the competition.

It has been argued that information is difference. But not all information distinguishes a particular company or product from its competition. Still less do all differentiations provide reasons. Purely negative differentiations — ‘the Uncola’, for example — rarely provide a basis for reasons to buy. Brands built on such inert differences tend to be ineffective. Brands define; effective brands define well. They differentiate a particular company or product in a way that gives potential customers reasons to buy.

The present authors’ definition of brand thus explains why differentiation is key not only to branding, but to messaging strategy. To establish a brand is to define what a product is and how it differs from alternatives. Those differences matter strategically, for they ground reasons for customers to prefer one product over another. This is why branding is the heart not just of marketing, but of nearly every aspect of a company, political or ideological campaign. Everything you say and do defines you; therefore, everything you say and do ‘brands’ you.

**HOW A CLEARER DEFINITION OF ‘BRAND’ AFFECTS BRANDING**

Just as the meaning of a word differs depending on its use, the impact of defining ‘brand’ as synonymous with ‘definition’ differs depending on the user and the audience. Marketing or agency professionals with an audience of business decision makers — the kind who read online CBS News articles with inflammatory titles like ‘Branding is Dead: Apple, Toyota, Leno & Obama Prove It’ — can confidently counter these kinds of increasingly common comment by noting that it would be ludicrous to abandon branding, which is simply a focused effort to ‘define’ what the company means to its customers, prospects, employees and investors.

Those actively engaged in studying or teaching of branding at any level can now articulate what a brand is more clearly, and thus be better understood, using this framework.

Those engaged in the practical application of branding, ‘defining’ a company, a movement, a political candidate, an ideology, or even an idea, will now be able to think holistically and comprehensively about their efforts. They will not be content to confine their influence to communications, or even to marketing. They will know, and they can help others to know, that each and every decision they make is a defining one.
References


