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The Book of Brand Mythology

15 brand fallacies debunked

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Introduction

Brand is a curious thing. Some think [brands are ubiquitous in today's modern world](#), while others think branding isn't important or there is [future danger of brands becoming irrelevant](#).

What feeds such diverse thinking? Brands are complicated. Branding isn't easy. And, what brands need to do to remain relevant keeps changing on marketers.

So, it's not surprising a lot of fallacies about brands exist. Let's dispel these myths.

The 15 Brand Fallacies

Fallacy #1: Brand is just a marketing thing.

Some may think this, but they'd be wrong. Brand strategy, or brand positioning, is inextricably linked to business strategy. If business strategy is about "Where to Play" and "How to Win," one will understand why brand positioning must align. Where to Play can be associated with, for example, industry strategic groups based on pricing and/or performance—is the brand going to compete as a premium, mid-tier, or value player? Brand positioning and a brand's value proposition must be in sync with this decision. Similarly, How to Win is tied to a brand's differentiating and relevant position in its market. What are the unique benefits and features this product is going to offer? How is the brand going to show up that makes it unique relative to other players in the market?

For example, back in the late 1990's, in the beauty and skin care markets P&G made a choice to reposition its Olay brand in a newly created "masstige" segment of the beauty market (prestige products typically sold in department stores brought to mass channels = Where to Play). The company accordingly aligned all the brand's activities against this new direction (How to Win). For example, what the brand stood for in the market changed (department store quality at mass prices positioned around the idea of "Fight the Seven Signs of Aging"), the brand identity and packaging changed, and how the company managed the brand's product portfolio and innovation changed to bring this new positioning to life. With this shift in both business strategy and brand positioning, Olay was able to grow at double-digits for over a decade becoming a \$2.5 billion brand.

Brand Tool: Business Strategy

Fallacy #2: Brand is only about creating emotional connections.

No doubt, aligning one's brand with a core consumer motivation is critical. Strong emotional connections with consumers have been shown to increase sales and build stronger brand affinity. Yet, brands must meet a consumer need, delivering solid product functionality, *and* build an emotional connection. The foundation of your brand that builds the business is strong product performance and delivery, the product's benefits and attributes. This is the foundation of your brand platform. And if your product doesn't perform, consumers won't come back. A strong emotional connection won't make-up for poor product performance. What your brand stands for and the brand's purpose, along with emotional engagement with your consumer, builds your brand, but also is a multiplier in building your business. In short, a brand needs to speak to the Head, Heart, and Gut—deliver on rational needs with a solid value proposition that keeps consumers coming back (speak to the Head), connect with consumers' core motivation (speak to the Heart), and be authentically crafted in a way that naturally speaks to consumers (speak to the Gut).

Take Nike as an example. The brand speaks to the core motivation of the everyday sports enthusiast with its "Just Do It" positioning and campaign (speak to the Heart) and communicates in a way that says "this brand is for me" through all of its marketing touchpoints (speak to the Gut), yet if its shoes didn't actually perform the other elements wouldn't matter. Nike's shoes deliver on functional product expectations (speak to the Head). The power comes when brands connect on all three of these dimensions.

Learn more about Brand Emotion: Speaking to the Head, Heart, and Gut. [Download the paper.](#)

Brand Tools: Brand Platform, Brand Positioning Statement, Value Proposition

Fallacy #3: Brand is controlled by a company and a marketer.

This might have been the case in the past, but certainly is not true today. A brand is an entity that can take on a life of its own and build meaning through the consumer's understanding and shaping, along with how the marketer controls the brand's behavior. Given the marketer's role, a brand is not "controlled" by a company, but rather nurtured and influenced. Certainly, a company can and should determine how to position its brand and can create a lighthouse positioning that is authentic and purpose- and belief-centric. And if the company communicates and behaves on-strategy, it's likely that consumers will experience the positioning you intend. But, that doesn't mean that you control it all. Today consumers are quite influential in spreading the word about your brand, from commenting on social sites from Yelp to Facebook and creating user-generated branded content that propagates various messages. In fact, [Engagement Labs](#) released a study late last year showing that 19 percent of sales are driven equally by offline and online social, "word-of-mouth" conversations.

Listening to your consumers and understanding them is central to building and guiding a brand. Consumers are more engaged with brands than ever before, and it's critical to build a relationship with them. By doing so, you can enlist them in helping to spread the word, per above, developing your products, and building your community, for example. Most importantly, it helps you understand how best to deliver against their motivations, to make your brand be about them and the role your brand plays in their lives, not the role the brand plays in your company's portfolio.

Brand Tools: Consumer Target and Personas, Consumer Core Motivations, Customer Journey Maps, Heavy User Understanding, Growth Target Understanding

Fallacy #4: Brand is about building equity and value for the company alone.

Brand equity and value is important, for sure. But today, brands are required to have a higher purpose. It's important to have a clear set of beliefs and ideology that takes your brand beyond the bottom line. In today's brand world, you must stand for more.

With trust in institutions declining, there is an opportunity for businesses and brands to step up and fill the void that is being created. Consumers are looking for steadying and for organizations to take responsibility and action. They want to see that businesses care about people and society beyond just their shareholders. Consider these data points:

- 79 percent of consumers prefer to purchase products from a company that operates with a social purpose. (Source: [Economist Purpose Study 2018](#))
- 56 percent of adults globally agree "I'd rather pay double for a product than buy it from a brand that I think is harmful to society." It increases to 63 percent for the age 18-29 demographic. (Source: [Looking Further with Ford Trend Report, 2018](#))
- 75 percent of consumers expect brands to make more of a contribution to their wellbeing and quality of life. (Source: [2017 Meaningful Brands® Global Study, Havas Group](#))

Learn more about [The New Brand Manifesto](#) and read about inspiring brands leading with purpose.

Brand Tools: Brand Ideology, Purpose, and Vision; Brand Story

Fallacy #5: Brand is irrelevant; marketing is all about ROI and performance marketing.

Digital, performance marketing has given us the ability to test and offers better insight into what marketing actually works, yet it has also confounded the issue, leading to complications in accurate marketing attribution. As marketing and retail channels proliferate and customer journeys become more complex, it takes that much more work to tease out true ROI. Performance marketing doesn't necessarily deliver the marketing holy grail after all.

Moreover, while we're all for ROI-driven marketing decision making, caring about and investing behind your brand is critical, even if you can't measure it in the same way as performance and growth marketing initiatives. Brand adds enduring value, and it requires that you build and own an emotional territory that connects with your consumers' core motivations. If you don't invest behind communicating the meaning of your brand, you likely won't build the deep emotional connection with your consumer that leads to higher sales and builds deeper engagement and lasting loyalty. Lest you think there isn't a way to measure brand value, there are. Marketers just have to open their minds to different measures (e.g., brand awareness, consideration, engagement) that will allow you to track performance.

There are companies out there that approach the marketing mix differently—some focusing entirely on performance and others balancing a mix of performance and brand. We advocate the mix approach. As noted in Fallacy #2, there are elements of your brand platform that you lean on to build your business, but there are other elements that build your brand. You need to nurture both.

Brand Tools: Marketing Plan, Budget Allocations

Fallacy #6: Brand is a campaign and advertising.

Building a brand is no small feat, and it's more complex than just a campaign. Before you even get to the campaign, you have to start by defining your brand strategy. I know... you want to get to the cool, fun stuff—the creative. But, if you don't know who you are, what you offer, to whom, and why, you're not in a position to build a brand. It doesn't matter if you have a cool campaign in and of itself. If that campaign doesn't communicate the right message to the right target at the right time with the right visual assets and tone, what does it matter?

The way brands were defined in the past has contributed to this fallacy. A brand positioning was often articulated as an advertising positioning, since TV and Print advertising were the two most often used mediums to market a brand. Yet, even then, brands were much more. A brand comes to life through every expression from its customer service experience (think Zappos and Nordstrom) and its iconography (think McDonald's and Tiffany's) to its website or app experience (think Amazon or Airbnb) and their stores (think Apple and Warby Parker).

Your brand strategy will guide all that you do to bring the brand to life. A campaign is point-in-time, addressing an insight and opportunity in the moment. A brand, in contrast, is enduring.

Brand Tools: Brand Positioning Statement, Value Proposition, Marketing Strategy, Communication Strategy, Customer Experience Strategy, Content Strategy, Touchpoint Strategy

Fallacy #7: Brand communication can be written by anyone.

In today's world, it's true that companies need to loosen the ties on brand communication given all the different touchpoints that require copy. Yet, if you don't have a clear articulation of your brand voice, tone, and examples of key messages, people will be shooting in the dark, and, even worse, the communications are likely to be inconsistent. This is an area where there are often big outages in organizations not valuing the power of voice and well-written copy.

Think about brands such as Cheeto's with Chester Cheetah, Everlane with its Radical Transparency positioning, or Glossier and its blog Into the Gloss that gave the company its start. These are finely crafted brands where the brand expressions and written words really matter in shaping the brand experience.

Invest in brand copy and in having a good copywriter on your team. At minimum, make sure your brand communication guidelines are solid.

Brand Tools: Brand Character & Personality, Brand Voice (Tone & Manner)

Fallacy #8: Brand is a name or logo.

A name and logo are just two of the elements that make up Brand Symbols and Equities. When used consistently over time, brand assets from visual (Coca-Cola red) to sound (Intel Inside) can become a shorthand system for consumers to choose you. When creating your brand, it's important to thoughtfully build these elements in from the start and then use them consistently. Don't forget the importance of this consistency as more of the customer experience moves online. For example, do you think a customer could pick out your Facebook or Instagram post from another brand in an instant?

Brand Tool: Brand Symbols & Equities

Fallacy #9: Brand building requires only a written positioning statement.

Many brand managers are business types rather than creative types. But most rely on creative types to bring their brands to life. Creatives tend not to like words. Words aren't their language. So, there are two things you can do. The first is to test out your final brand positioning with your creative team, if you are lucky to have one, and make sure the articulation is creatively inspiring. A brand strategy should inspire and lead to ideas jumping off the page. If you don't yet have a creative team, share it with some creative people in your network. The second thing to do is translate your positioning into a creative output, which can take different forms from a creative expression to creative samples. This will provide a good foundation from which creative partners can springboard and develop creative assets that are on strategy.

Once you have created a full articulation of your brand, it's helpful to create a Brand Book to make sure each person or agency that touches the brand won't reinterpret the positioning and create their own visual palette, leading to inconsistency. Brand Books can take different forms and can range from simple to more complex.

Brand Tools: Creative Expression & Creative Brief, Brand Book

Fallacy #10: Brand should come to life in fun, interesting product names.

Marketers and agency partners are often quick to develop fun product names. Of course, we all love to be creative and want to be recognized for something that is clever and gets noticed. However, most don't stop to think about whether the name clearly communicates the product's or service's value proposition to the consumer, nor about the amount of money required to invest and build meaning and awareness behind such a name. Deciding to create a fanciful name rather than a descriptive name is an important trade-off that one shouldn't take lightly. You need to balance creative interest with marketing spend and uniqueness with quick communication. Such choices need to be made thoughtfully, strategically, and balancing inspiration with intuition and discipline. Now, there's no doubt that in today's product proliferation environment finding a name that one can even trademark is difficult, but that doesn't negate these principles.

This is why brand architecture is important. Brand architecture is the segmentation of a brand's products and the related nomenclature and naming system. Few understand or value brand architecture as they should, yet it's critically important when managing a brand to guide brand development.

Brand Tool: Brand Architecture & Nomenclature System

Fallacy #11: Brand can be a savior for inferior product.

Some may think that if they tell a good story they can get away with a sub-par product. Consumers are too savvy for that today. This doesn't mean all products have to be premium and meet the highest quality standards, but rather that they need to match the value proposition you are targeting in the market.

Brand Tool: Product Aspiration & Guardrails

Fallacy #12: Brand is all about selling product today.

Yes and no. Brand should certainly sell product in the short-term, but building a brand earns you permission to grow your business into new product categories. In essence, you can build a valuable asset that gives you permission to extend and grow your brand into future offerings.

Think about brands like Crest that started in toothpaste and now offer products across the dental market, Nature Valley that has its traditional granola bars and has expanded into other snack offerings, and Lego that took its equity into a high-grossing film.

Brand Tools: Innovation Architecture, Innovation Pipeline, Equity Development Plan

Fallacy #13: Brand is all art, no science.

Marketers tend to like the bright, shiny object or think about brand and branding as being about engagement and entertainment. They like the cool campaign (think Apple's iconic iPod ads or Dos Equis' "Most Interesting Man in the World" campaign), the Youtube video that hits it big (think Old Spice or Chipotle's "Back to the Start" video), or the fun PR stunt (Warby Parker's Class Trip traveling library).

Rarely do people get as many accolades for something like the brilliance of Federal Express becoming FedEx and its successful brand architecture that built equity in that brand and transitioned Kinko's to FedEx Office, for example. Or, consider the fact that Dannon brilliantly managed its trademarks to bring the once Stonyfield Oikos Greek yogurt brand into the Dannon family, ultimately making it its own master brand now just endorsed by Dannon.

Brand and branding definitely include the first—the creative, the inspiration, the art. But, it also requires thoughtful strategy and methodology. Brand management is a blend of art and science, balancing inspiration, intuition, and discipline. You need to know when to govern with which hand.

Brand Tool: Experienced Brand Stewards

Fallacy #14: Brand is about creating a strategy or positioning statement only when first building a brand.

Brand development is an ongoing process, especially given all the elements required to build and manage a brand. Also, brands aren't static, and how you manage a brand is likely to vary depending on its age. A young brand (think Everlane or Stitch Fix) needs to be managed with patience and consistency, yet one must also be open to learning and be flexible. Brand development takes consistent nurturing over time. As a brand ages (think Crest or Airbnb even), you can build brand permission with a thoughtful plan to develop equities that move the brand into new spaces. An older brand might find itself in a position where it needs a repositioning (think Burberry, Domino's, or even Martha Stewart whose made a comeback), and the cycle starts over.

Brand Tools: Equity Development Plan, Brand Evaluation

Fallacy #15: Brand only needs to be positioned for the consumer.

Most brands and businesses have more stakeholders and audiences than just the consumer, such as retailers as distribution channels or independent business owners using a platform offer. One should consider positioning a brand for each of these relevant stakeholders to provide marketing and sales guidance, as required.

Brand Tools: Audiences & Messaging Grid, Stakeholder Positioning

Conclusion

It can be hard to wrap one's head around brands and branding. They can take different shapes and be built in different ways. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to defining and building a brand. This is why fallacies develop.

Managing brands is multi-faceted:

- It's not just a marketing thing. A brand is integrated into your entire business proposition.
- It's not just what a company wants it to be. A brand gets shaped by its consumers and others who interact with it. It can be impacted by its competitive environment and evolving trends.
- It's not just how the brand comes to life creatively. A brand does consist of creative elements, for sure, but it also develops through disciplined management.
- It's not static. A brand needs management over time and has the opportunity to expand in meaning and develop permission to grow into new spaces.

Brands aren't going away. If anything, they are just getting that much more complicated to manage. With these myths debunked, one's eyes can be opened to approach branding practices in a more holistic way. But keep your eyes open, because new myths are sure to develop and new approaches defined to address them.

Want help in defining a brand strategy and working with your team to bring it to life? Contact [Kathy](#) at [The Agency Oneto](#) to start the conversation.



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