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Does brand meaning exist in similarity or singularity?

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on Clark and Marshall's [Clark Herbert H., Marshall Catherine R. *Definite Reference and Mutual Knowledge*. In: Joshi Aravind K., Webber Bonnie L., Sag Ivan A., editors. *Elements Of Discourse Understanding*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981.] theory of mutual knowledge, this article presents a framework for understanding and managing brand meaning. Specifically, we provide an overarching theory of branding, with associated testable propositions. While traditional brand management theory focuses primarily on brand-related marketing communications, the role that the knowledge base of the recipient plays in interpreting these communications is generally overlooked. This may explain the multiple and sometimes dissonant brand meanings that arise despite consistent, simple and memorable brand communications. The theory of mutual knowledge stresses that assonance of meaning will only arise between the sender and recipient of a set of communications when both parties share a mutual knowledge base. Thus, to co-create brand meaning, organizations must understand the knowledge base of different stakeholder groups. Effective brand co-creation combines the management of both communications and stakeholders' mutual knowledge.

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1. Introduction

The implicit assumption underpinning much of the branding literature is that if you keep your brand communications simple, steady, and memorable people reach a shared brand meaning that is consistent with an organization's. The theory of mutual knowledge suggests this may be erroneous as meaning ascribed to a given communication is a function of both the communication and the recipient's knowledge base. As Keller (2003) notes, two key areas of consumer research revolve around the creation, and representation, of brand knowledge. Groups with divergent knowledge bases will almost certainly interpret brand communications differently and elicit different meanings, yet this scenario is largely overlooked in the extant branding literature. The theory of mutual knowledge suggests that one needs to understand a recipient's knowledge base before formulating a targeted communication. Moreover, homogeneous shared brand meaning may be obvious in theory, but difficult in practice. Organizations might focus on tailoring messages to different groups and thus manage a polysemy of brand images under an overarching core theme.

This article responds to Keller's (2003) recent call for new models that encompass all the different meanings a brand may cover, and is set out as follows. First, the paper explores the various meanings of

brand meaning and how these meanings can be created. Brand knowledge is introduced and integrated into the discussion before beginning to consider the many and varied problems brand managers face in attempting to address consumer knowledge gaps. Two models are then offered and drawn on, with the extant literature, to develop four research propositions before finally discussing the contribution and implications of this approach.

2. Brand meaning

Communication theorists stress the importance of creating a shared sense of meaning in communicative acts (Clark, 1976; Schramm and Roberts, 1971). This requires that a sender selects words, phrases and symbols that convey his/her ideas to an intended message recipient, who upon reception, assigns meaning to the communication (Schramm and Roberts, 1971). When both a sender and receiver share common ground or knowledge with respect to the intended meaning of a message, comprehension prevails and the communication is successful (Chwe, 1998). Establishing mutual knowledge, then, is an essential ingredient of eliciting shared meanings in communicative acts (Clark and Marshall, 1981; Fussell and Krauss, 1991).

Brands creation occurs primarily through various forms of communication, which can include any strategy or technique that transfers meaning from one person to another or from a product to a customer (Schultz and Barnes, 1999). Early conceptualizations of successful brand management revolve around operationalizing a

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