

## **THE INFLUENCE OF BRAND STORY IN BUILDING A POSITIVE BRAND IMAGE**

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### **Abstract**

*Brand story has become one of the marketing tools in branding for many organizations including both the non-governmental organizations and private corporate. The most important objective in having a successful brand story is to build a positive brand image for the organization that it represents. However, most of the brand stories are not well designed or not written with clear purpose in building positive brand images. Several companies have utilized brand story as a great tool and successfully bring their company to a new milestone in the development of their brand image. The objective of this article is to identify the benefits of a positive brand image to an organization as well as how a brand story can build a positive brand image. The concept of brand image in this article will be focused on the perspective of the customers for the organizations or brand. A successful brand story should be able to empower and motivate the customers on the memory towards the brand, convey the purpose and relevance of the brand to the customers as well as building emotional bonds between the customers and the brand. In conclusion, a brand story is one of the most effective ways to build a positive brand image and should be well planned and designed to provide the optimum influence to the brand image.*

*Keywords: Brand Story, Brand Image, Brand Loyalty, Content Marketing, Customer Engagement*

## INTRODUCTION

### Brand and Brand Image

Branding has always been the centre of marketing strategy in any of the company or organization since the day as early as 1950s (Padgett & Allen, 1997). A brand is thought of as a single entity - a particular set of beliefs that distinguish it from other brands, types of interactions that are associated with a distinctive brand experience, or the total amount of value associated with it (Wyner, 2015).

According to Haigh & Knowles, (2004), there are at least three different definitions of brand base on three different perspectives. The first definition define brand as a logo and associated visual elements. These include the trade names, trademarks and trade symbols. They are used to differentiate company's products or services over another brand.

The second definition of brand is a wider concept of brand including marketing intangibles such as domain names, product design rights and so on. It covers a bundle of trademark and associated intellectual property rights (Haigh & Knowles, 2004). The definition can further be enhanced to include a larger bundle of visual and marketing intangibles which refer to the whole organization. It usually refers to a holistic company or organization brand. This broadest definition of brand emphasizes the need for consistent communication with all stakeholders including customers, staffs, suppliers, vendors, regulators and provider of the capital (Haigh & Knowles, 2004).

In order to add value to the brand, the brand and its visual and marketing intangibles carry "associated goodwill," which are acquired by providing high-quality products and by giving good service over a long period. This goodwill can also be known as the brand image.

However, this may not always be true as the brand image can sometimes not be the positive one. A company can define and communicate its identity and corporate brand, but its brand image and reputation result from constituency impressions of a company's behaviour. A company has much lesser control within the company over its brand image and reputation (Argenti & Druckenmiller, 2004). Dobni & Zinkhan (1990) concluded that brand image is defined with the following strictures:

- Brand image is the concept of a brand that is held by the consumer.
- Brand image is largely a subjective and perceptual phenomenon that is formed through consumer interpretation, whether reasoned or emotional.
- Brand image is not inherent in the technical, functional or physical concerns of the product. Rather, it is affected and moulded by marketing activities, by context variables, and by the characteristics of the perceiver.
- In case of brand image, perception of reality is more important than the reality itself.

It is clearly seen from the above definition that a brand image is mostly a perception that can be moulded to become a positive brand image or a negative brand image. In order to simplify the definition of brand image is of Feldwick (1996) who states that brand image is, '*a description of the beliefs and association the consumer has about a brand*'. This definition of Feldwick (1996) is based on the consumers' perception of a brand. As far as an organization concern, the building of a brand image is usually towards a positive direction.

### **Benefits of a Positive Brand Image**

In year 2010, Smith et.al has conducted a study and concluded that a corporate with a positive brand image will have higher market value; reputable firm behaviour creates a valuable intangible asset that is distinct from industry peers. The increase of intangible asset can directly increase the value of tangible asset by increasing the sales of the corporate and thus increase in the corporate stockholders' wealth. Besides, corporate with positive brand image also enjoy superior financial performance. They are more profitable on several dimensions including the return on assets and sales on assets ratio. The third benefits are that these firms have lower risk, as they are less volatile in sales and net income, less likelihood of bankruptcy, and have lower stock price volatility.

Beside these financial benefits for corporate which has a positive brand image. A corporate enjoys the following benefits:

#### ***Enhance Corporate Reputation***

A corporate brand creates expectations in the minds of consumers as to what the company will deliver, meeting those expectations creates the image in the minds of consumers that a company desires, which, in turn, enhances overall reputation (Argenti & Druckenmiller, 2004).

A corporate reputation can also be enhanced by positive brand image that associates the brand to social responsibilities. A Price Waterhouse report noted, 'Some customers may be willing to pay \$3.00 for a bar of soap, knowing that some of the money is going to a worthy cause. Others will be turned off to a company that uses its profits to support such a bold political agenda' (Argenti and Forman, 2002).

#### ***Provide Cohesiveness and Lend Credibility to New Product or Service***

A good brand image promotes more repeating purchases from the customers. Trust in the brand becomes the motivator to make one purchase rather than another. If the brand is seen as trustworthy in the eyes of the consumer then the brand has fulfilled one of its obligations.

In most of the industries, especially a consumers driven industry, a brand image provides an expectation of the quality and credibility of a new product or service according to the consumers' previous experiences on the predecessor products or services carrying the same brands or within the same line of the brands.

### ***Provide Confidence to the Customers***

Consumers tend to buy products or services with positive brand image as they feel that the brand is sincere in creating value to the customers.

In automobile industry, a car is possibly the second most important purchase of a lifetime, after a house. Hence, the importance of getting it right, not only for personal needs but also for social reasons such as image.

The risk of getting the car choice wrong is so great that a brand is essential in helping reduce this risk. If consumers have confidence in a brand and they know that their particular needs will be answered by this brand, then the risk of getting it wrong is reduced.

A positive brand image serves as reinforcement for the role of reassurance played by the brand. Reassurance is concerned not only with consumers making the right choice depending on their needs but also with guaranteeing a specific level of quality (Melewar & Sambrook, 2004).

### ***Create and Enhance Brand Loyalty***

Association with the brand having a positive image may result in benefits to a consumer in terms of self-identity and self-enhancement. The consumer aspires to participate in a relationship with the brand and shows his/her loyalty to the brand. In general, the more favourable the image, the higher is the perceived product quality, consumer satisfaction and loyalty (He & Lai, 2012)

Brands can create loyalty by creating emotional connections and meaningful users' experiences. A reputable brand with positive brand image provides a sense of 'feel-good' to its customers. This 'feel-good' effect arises from using the products or services by a brand with positive brand image reinforce the consumers' purchase decision by providing rewards to the consumers in terms of social recognition and exclusivity of its social circle. This creates a long lasting brand loyalty among the consumers.

The brand image is one of the deciding factors for consumers when making their spending decision. The character and value of the products or services is portrait by their images. These images are the brand promises that the corporate is making.

For example, Air Asia group started their business in year 2001 with merely 2 old aircraft and 11million USD debt. However, since the first day of its operation, it portrayed itself as the low-cost airline with clear tagline, 'Now Everyone Can Fly'. This has sent a very clear brand image to the consumers and it serves as the brand promise to its users (Poon & Waring, 2010). Air Asia keeps its brand promise by 3 key measures:

### 1. *Committed to Low Fares*

Pricing of airlines tickets is generally 80% lower than the equivalent Full Service Airlines (FSA) price for early bookings while late bookings are generally 20% below the FSA price

### 2. *Low Cost Carrier Model with More Self-Automation*

There are no extra payments for unnecessary needs and cost-saving innovations. Air Asia is the first airline to adopt new Airbus A320 installed with 'sharklet wing tips' to lower wind drag and provide better fuel consumption. Air Asia is also one of the few airlines in the region to introduce self-check-in as well as self-luggage check-in at the airport. All these measures have made Air Asia one of the most cost efficient airlines in the world.

### 3. *Great Value, with Emphasis on Safety*

Air Asia cost optimization philosophy is in no way at the expense of safety (Poon & Waring, 2010). Through these measures, Air Asia Group successfully turns the debt bearing company to one of the most successful low-cost airline in the world. It has won the award of World's Best Low Cost Airlines by Skytrax for 7 years straight since year 2009 (Achievements, 2015). In the recent award giving ceremony, Airasia has won the same awards for the 8<sup>th</sup> time in the year of 2016 (A-Z of 2016 World Airline Awards winners, 2016).

## **Branding Positively by Brand Story**

Every memorable event and remarkable people in the history starts with a great story. A great story is always the favourite of everyone. What if a great story is your own brand story? In the era of electronic and social media, it is not easy to build a brand image and send your brand's messages across to the audience of the organizations. The brands that are able to form connections with their audience are the ones who are better in storytelling.

A story is a narrative with a beginning, middle, and an end (order may be changed). More importantly, it is not as simple as portraying a set of facts and figures to the audience but it is delivered in the context of narrative to the target audience.

A brand story is an authentic, fascinating and intriguing story with a strategic message that clarifies and enhances the brand that it represents. It is an asset that promotes growth, provides inspiration, and offers guidance both within and outside an organization which hold the brand. A good brand story that can represent the organization well can also be known as a signature brand story.

According to Aaker & Aakerin 2016, a signature brand story should have 4 important characteristics, intriguing, authentic, involving, and having a strategic message. A signature story needs to be intriguing to grab the attention and curiosity of the audience. There must be a reason for the audience to notice and process the story. It is important that the story should be informative, provocative, interesting, newsworthy and entertaining.

An authentic story means that it should be believable, convincing and does not have obvious selling or marketing motive behind the story. It can be fictional, but it cannot be unbelievable and should carry a certain level of credibility. In addition, it should also carry weight with substance behind the story. For example, the story of Air Asia with the tagline of 'Now everyone can fly' conveys the low cost airline business model and it inspires more people to travel by airlines which used to be a privilege of a small group of people in the past.

An involving brand story means that the audience or the customers (in the context of a corporate's brand story) gets involved in the story which usually will precipitate emotional or behavioural response. Starbucks Inc. has a very successful brand story that brand itself as the 'third place'. A 'third place' is a place between home and workplace; it involves their customers in their brand story where Starbucks successfully created a sense of belonging for the customers to treat Starbucks Café as one of their very own place besides their home and workplace (Schultz & Gordon, 2011).

A brand story should also contain strategic messages that clarify or enhance the brand image, customer relationship, and/ or corporate strategy. It can communicate and leverage the organization's or brand's heritage, culture, and values and finally helps to draw the future vision of the organization with a storyline of how to get there (Aaker & Aaker, 2016).

By having a successful and compelling brand story, it will become a powerful tool for an organization or brand to build a positive and clear brand image in order to enjoy the benefits of having a positive brand image.

A brand story are powerful in building a positive brand image because it can empower and motivate audience, convey purpose and relevance of the brand, relates customers' experience to the brand and enhance organization's value and culture (or company's value and culture in the context of business corporate).

### **Empower and Motivate Audience (Memorable and Persuasive)**

In the book *Made to stick: Why some ideas survive and others die*, it is clearly showed the power of narration in relative to fact statements (Heath & Heath, 2007). In an experiment, they gave students data on crime statistics in the U.S. and each of the students was then asked to give a talk base on the data. After the task, the students then were asked to write down what other speakers had said. Only 10% of the speakers formed the data into stories while the rest relied on statistics. However, the result is that 63% recalled stories and only 5% recalled any statistics (Heath & Heath, 2007).

A story is often able to portrait a longer lasting memory than facts and figures. This is because, firstly, a brand story normally consists of characters, emotion, story plot, as well as a lead to conclusion. It helps to build imaginary image in the brain of the audiences and allows the audiences or the customers to relate their personal experience with the brand to the brand story. Secondly, a story is normally more interesting and able to capture the attention of the audience. As a result, the listener of the story normally will be more attentive and involved than the person who just receives recitation of facts and figures. Thirdly, a brand story is normally more structured and able to link up multiple facts and information that the organization is trying to convey. This makes it easier for the audience to remember the information. Lastly, a successful brand story will be able to provide resonance to the customers' brand experience that they previously had. This will embed the story in the memory in a stronger way than mere facts.

This will empower the audiences to have the feel-good effect towards the brand and remind them on the brand image that the organization is trying to build through the story. However, the brand story should be in consistent with the brand image and the brand experience of the customers. The inter-reminding effect between the brand story, brand image, as well as the brand experience of the customer is able to create a long lasting memory in the customer or the audience. An inconsistency between the brand story, brand image as well as the brand experience of the customers will not only fail to provide a long lasting memory on the brand but building a positive brand image for the organization.

### **Convey Purpose and Relevance of the Brand**

A brand story helps to build a positive image by providing a clear position and identity for the brand of an organization. The development of a brand story can be a vehicle to understand what a brand or organization should stand for at its core.

This can serve as a tool to deliver the vision and mission of an organization in a more tangible way to the stakeholders. The key persons and the employees of the organization must

be able to articulate the brand story and be reminded of the organization's vision and mission. This is crucial for a successful brand story to be spread beyond the organizations or to the customers of a corporate.

The physical product or service no longer makes the difference among competitors of the same field. The difference lies in the story and the content of the story lies in the vision, mission and culture of the organization. This creates the purpose and relevance of the brand in the market (Quek, 2013).

The brand story is what drives the bond between the company and the consumer. It carries the brand promise of the organization and provides a distinct identity of the brand compare to the other competitors that provide similar products or services in the market. Thus, the story of a brand has the power to strengthen a brand both externally and internally.

Air Asia's vision is to be the largest low cost airline in Asia and serving the 3 billion people who are currently underserved with poor connectivity and high fares. Air Asia also has very clear mission statements that are:

- i. To be the best company to work for whereby employees are treated as part of a big family
- ii. Create a globally recognized ASEAN brand
- iii. To attain the lowest cost so that everyone can fly with AirAsia
- iv. Maintain the highest quality product, embracing technology to reduce cost and enhance service levels

With these clear vision and mission statements, Air Asia creates and spreads its brand story by using the backbone of "Now Everyone Can Fly" and the story of how its founder, turned a company at the edge of bankruptcy to one of the most success low cost airlines in the world ("Air Asia mission, vision & values," 2016).

The brand story of Air Asia successfully embeds the purpose (vision) and the relevance (mission) of Air Asia and provides a clear and distinct identity to the brand of Air Asia among the customers as well as the other stakeholders.

### **Relates Consumers' Experience and Build Emotional Bond to the Brand**

The best story is the reflection of the brand's willingness to give its audience a say in the brand story in order to capture the hearts and minds of the audience, or in the case of a corporate, its customers. It is also a common belief that stories help to persuade. Stories had been used since the ancient time.

In Sun Tzu Art of War, stories were used as a tool by the counselors of the courts to persuade the kings or the generals to start or stop a war (Sunzi, Tzu, Griffith, & Hart, 1971). Positive stories have the power to engage emotions. This is because they are about people,



things and situations that the customers or audiences can identify with and relate to. Besides, a good brand story can create an emotional bond between the customers and the brand by the following ways:

First, stories are effective at changing attitudes because, in a story context, people deduce the logic themselves. Instead of telling the logic and the facts by the company directly to the customers or the audiences, people will be more emotionally attached to their own beliefs that derive themselves from the stories.

Second, stories persuade by inhibiting counter-arguing. The power of the story distracts and breaks down suspicion. A brand story with emotion is more likely to win the hearts of customers and influence the process of decision making than a set of figures. This is because facts are emotionless and often create suspicion among the audience of the authenticity of the facts and figures. This positive emotion that a brand story creates will lead the customer to have a positive perception towards the brand. It would be inconsistent to have a positive feeling about the characters or the plot of the brand story and have a negative feeling about the brand that was in some ways a driver of the story or its outcome (Aaker & Aaker, 2016).

A successful brand story does not always bring functional benefits. In fact, its usual role is to reveal the emotional side of the brand or organization. In September 2014, Starbucks Inc. has kicked started a branding campaign called 'Meet me at Starbucks'. In this campaign, a video chronicling a day in the life of Starbucks through a mini-documentary was shot in 59 different stores in 28 countries, using 39 local filmmakers, by 10 local photographers and one director.

It's a different advertising approach for Starbucks, which for the past few years has spent the large part of its advertising budget on advertisements that promote specific products or the quality of its coffee. Starbucks sought to remind consumers about its roots through the emotional side of the brand (Vranica, 2014).

Besides, a brand story is more likely to be retold than the facts and figures of an organization. People like to listen to stories and willing to spread the stories around if they were interesting, informative, newsworthy, provocative and entertaining.

A story tends to be shared by the audiences when it contains useful information (making the sender feel knowledgeable and giving), when it makes people care (in part by creating an emotional response), when it is in some way remarkable (perhaps with a "can you believe" moment), when it has "insider" information (an obscure but interesting story), or when it generates physiological arousal (e.g., the feeling of awe, amusement, excitement, or anger) (Aaker & Aaker, 2016).

## CONCLUSION

Brand image is a valuable asset to an organization. Many companies or organizations have spent great effort to build a positive brand image towards their audiences or customers. However, brand image is also a very fragile asset where it will be easily ruined by any negative news, stories or rumors of the brand.

This is especially true and important for customer-oriented companies with emphasize in the service industry where the customer's experience with the companies will directly affect the brand image of the companies.

A positive brand image brings many positive effects to the company either directly or indirectly. It can enhance corporate reputation, provide cohesiveness and lend credibility to new product or service of the same corporate, provide confidence to the customers as well as create and enhance brand loyalty.

A brand story is able to represent its organization and it serves as an asset that promotes growth, provides inspiration and offers guidance to the organization. The backbone of a successful brand story should consist of 4 main elements, which are intriguing, authentic, involving and have a strategic message embedded in the story.

A successful brand story is one of the most effective ways to build a positive brand image by empowers and motivates audience, conveys purpose and relevance of the brand as well as relates consumers' experience and build emotional bond to the brand.

However, in order for a brand story to be successful, it has to be spread and influential. A brand story should be planned and designed base on facts and written in a way that it is fascinating and able to capture the attention of the audience, then only it will be able to exert its effect to the optimum level. The exercise of brainstorming in designing the brand story can be a 'warm-up' workshop for the key persons of an organization to have a better understanding on its core values. The process can be inspiring and provide new momentum to an organization from within. The influence of brand story towards its own organization is an area worth for studying and complement to this article for a better understanding on the influence of a brand story.

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