Exploring Brand Concepts from the Perspectives of Organizations and Customers

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Abstract: *In the modern era, brands are widely researched and have various definitions, but generally, brands are approached from two main perspectives: the financial perspective of the organization and the customer's perspective. According to researchers, there are various concepts of brands, but they can be grouped into 12 themes, including: brand as a symbol; brand as a legal tool; brand as a company; brand as an abbreviation; brand as a risk mitigation tool; brand as an identification system; brand as an image in the consumer's mind; brand as a value system; brand as a personality; brand as a relationship; brand as added value; and finally, brand as a developing entity.*

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Brands are present everywhere, in almost every aspect of life from economics, society, culture, sports, even religion. For example, temples with well-known brands, with monks who take care of the community, will attract more visitors and donations than other temples. For this reason, companies, businesses, and organizations have realized that one of their most valuable assets is their brand name associated with the products or services they offer and that are known by people.

Historically, in ancient civilizations, such as in Greece, producers used labels and names to identify or point out their objects like wine, pottery, or metals. The word "brand" in Old Norse means "to burn." Back then, branding with a hot iron was used to mark the livestock of farm owners. In modern times, brands are widely studied and have various definitions, but generally, brands are approached from two main perspectives: the financial perspective of the organization and the customer's perspective.

According to researchers, there are many different concepts of brands, but they can be grouped into 12 themes including: brand as a symbol; brand as a legal tool; brand as a company; brand as an abbreviation; brand as a risk mitigation tool; brand as an identification system; brand as an image in the consumer's mind; brand as a value system; brand as a personality; brand as a relationship; brand as added value; and finally, brand as a developing entity(1).

1. Brand as a symbol (Logo)

Researchers such as Aaker (1991) and Kotler et al. (1996)[2] have argued that a brand is "a name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's goods or services as distinct from those of other sellers." Similarly, the American Marketing Association defines 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" [3].

Technically, whenever a marketer creates a new name, logo, or symbol for a new product, they have created a brand. The legal term for a brand is a trademark. A brand can be identified as a single item, a group of items, or all items of a seller. If used for an entire company/organization, the brand becomes a trade name, e.g., Samsung is the trade name of Samsung Group with various products like Samsung TV, Samsung phones. According to a consumer survey published by YouGov Vietnam in 2021, Samsung topped the list of the best brands in Vietnam, surpassing over 350 other brands[4].

2. Brand as a legal tool

Scholars writing about this aspect of branding include Crainer (1995), Kapferer (1995), and Lea and Murphy (1996)[5]. A brand is a legal declaration of ownership, a sign to identify ownership. The Oxford Dictionary defines a brand as "a type of product, service, etc. made or offered by a particular company under a particular name" [6]. This definition is based on the manufacturer's perspective and does not fully reflect the essence of the brand.

If a brand is not distinctive enough or does not resonate with customers, legal protection will not be very meaningful because the brand is not favored or used by consumers. For instance, a composer who copyrights a piece of music that he keeps to himself and does not publish means that the music is not popularized, not orchestrated, not recorded, and not broadcasted to public listeners. Legal protection for this work is not very valuable because it is not used. Thus, a brand has legal validity when its products start being used in life.

3. Brand as a company name

In fact, it is a company known by its brand. The company name is very important because when a company does well and earns consumer trust, it provides a competitive advantage to the organization. Thanks to the brand assets accumulated by the company name, the business owner can expand product lines based on the company's identity. For example, Vingroup started with real estate products, and now its product portfolio is very diverse, all bearing the name VIN. Examples include Vinfast, VinSmart, VinAI, VinBigData, VinCSS, VinHMS, VinBrain, Vinhomes, Vinpearl, Vincom, Vinschool, Vinmec, VinUni, VinFuture, VinIF, VinBioCare, VinBus.

However, not all companies with the same brand architecture operate consistently according to the company's brand strategy. Therefore, the brand as a company name is more suitable for companies that already have a strong brand. Even though we also see large corporations like Coca-Cola producing many products under different brand names, such as Fuze, Coca-Cola, Coca-Cola Zero, Fanta, Sprite, etc. These brands represent Coca-Cola's beverage products. These brand names are used to distinguish Coca-Cola's beverages from the beverage lines of other brands.

4. Brand as an abbreviation

A characteristic of a brand is its representation through images, connecting everything the brand wants the public to recognize about the organization. This could be a symbol, writing, color scheme, or design style. Brands are often designed to be short and simple so that consumers can remember them when they need to shop. Studies on "Brand as an Abbreviation" of the initials in names were introduced by Jacoby & associates (1977) and Chevan (1992)(7) based on the customer's perspective. Customers have many different concerns, so a short and clear brand will be easier for them to remember.

For example, most Vietnamese banks have memorable abbreviations of their English names, such as VCB (Vietnam Commercial Bank), BIDV (Bank for Investment and Development of Vietnam), MB (Military Commercial Joint Stock Bank), etc. As well as industrial corporations like EVN (Electricity Vietnam), Viettel (Military Industry and Telecommunications Group), or VNPT (Vietnam Posts and Telecommunications Group), etc.

Successful brands with abbreviations usually have shorter abbreviated names than the original brand names. Or consumers have used those abbreviations in daily life, making them easy to read and remember. However, in spoken language, abbreviated brand names are not always easy to use. For example, the football club "Hoàng Anh Gia Lai" is abbreviated as "HAGL". In writing, HAGL is shorter, but in spoken language, both HAGL and Hoang Anh Gia Lai have four syllables, and "Hoàng Anh Gia Lai" is easier to pronounce.

5. Brand as a risk mitigation tool

In this concept, the brand is considered a contract between the organization and the consumer. Researchers on this topic include Bauer (1960), Assael (1995), Staveley (1987), and Kapferer (1995, 2004)[8]. They believe that consumers often feel apprehensive about encountering risks when buying poor-quality goods when approaching a service or product. Therefore, marketers introducing products need to build trust with consumers. Additionally, to maintain reputation, producers and businesses need to invest in quality management of products, building and managing the brand.

However, sometimes in the process from producer to consumer, risks to a brand may arise from other partners, such as agents, product booths, or services. Therefore, considering the brand as a risk mitigation tool sometimes cannot be definitively confirmed by all parties involved.

6. Brand as an identification system

A brand is an identification system, a structure of identity with the integration of cultural, tangible, self-created image, reflection, and relationship aspects. Kapferer, J.N. (2004)[9], one of the researchers representing this concept, proposed a brand identity prism[10]. Specifically as follows:

- The "Culture" aspect of the brand is a set of core values, the messages that the organization/business wants to convey to customers about its brand. For example, the corporate culture of Viettel is built to create differentiation, with the mission "Innovation for Humans" and the philosophy "Business associated with social responsibility," 8 core values, Viettel standards, and a code of conduct, etc. In 2022, Viettel was awarded the "Vietnam Business Culture Standards" certificate for the second time[11]. When mentioning the "Viettel" brand, consumers often think of Viettel's culture.

- The "Physique" aspect of the brand is the representation of symbols and what surfaces of the brand, retained in consumers' minds when mentioned. For example, the Audi car symbol has four circles, the Mercedes car has a star, and the fast-food chain McDonald's has a yellow letter M on a red background, etc.

- The "Personality" aspect of the brand reflects the brand's personality and attitude, the characteristics that the brand wants customers to perceive, including prestige, friendliness, responsibility, etc. For example, when mentioning the "Honda" brand, Vietnamese consumers often remember Honda with the campaign "I Love Vietnam" implemented since 2003 for various audiences, including children's education programs. This campaign aims at safe driving, providing knowledge for traffic participants. "I Love Vietnam" has created a sense of Honda's responsibility as a member of society for the safety of Vietnamese people.

- The "Self-image" aspect of the brand reflects the inner perception of the target customer group. Customers use high-end brands because they want others to think about them or evaluate them associated with the brand symbol. For example, users of luxury cars like Mercedes-Maybach want others to think they are successful, wealthy, and "well-off" to drive such expensive cars. Therefore, brand managers of organizations always strive to integrate this aspect to enhance the brand's prestige.

- The "Reflection" aspect of the brand shows who the target audience of the brand is, who the brand is aimed at. For example, Honda's motorcycle product lines focus on middle-income, dynamic, self-reliant, young people in Vietnam. In many marketing campaigns, Honda partners with Đen Vâu as the brand ambassador for Honda Vietnam. Đen Vâu, widely known as becoming a popular rapper from a sanitation worker in Quảng Ninh Province. He has a significant influence on young people due to his resilience and self-reliance in life. The image below is Honda's campaign "Bring money home to mom, not worries to mom" with Đen Vâu[12].

- The "Relationship" aspect of the brand reflects the trust and associations customers have with the enterprise's brand. This aspect is crucial for a service business rather than a product manufacturing one because services are directly related to relationships. For example, Starbucks is a famous coffee chain worldwide and has been present in Vietnam since 2013. Not only relying on its established brand to expand the market and increase revenue, but Starbucks has also always paid attention to customers, placing them at the center.

With the "relationship" marketing campaign that Starbucks implemented called *"What's your Starbucks idea?"*, Starbucks receives, interacts with, and responds to customer opinions, always focusing on building relationships with customers through their owned digital media channels. Starbucks uses articles and social media channels to interact directly with consumers. Starbucks fans send their ideas for new products, suggestions for reviving old products, or requests for improving existing products, etc. Through this campaign, fans feel as though they are contributing to shaping the business development of Starbucks.

7. Brand as an image in the consumer's mind

According to scholars including Keller (1993)[13], consumers generally do not "react" to reality but only "perceive" reality. This implies that the brand image is the perception of the brand in the customer's mind. This perception is a synthesis of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that customers retain about the brand; it is the image in the consumer's mind of the functional, psychological attributes and associations linked with a brand.

Today's young consumers purchase products not only because the products are good but also because of who the producing enterprise is and how it is depicted in their minds. For example, young people often go to cafes considered "luxurious" like Highland, Starbucks, not just to drink coffee but to enjoy and experience the space filled with people and the comfortable surroundings with the aroma of coffee that these enterprises create.

8. Brand as a value system

Representing researchers on the brand as a value system include Thrift (1997), Beckett (1996), Southgate (1996)[14], and many other scholars. According to this view, each brand represents groups of values that customers either have experienced or perceived when using the products or services of that brand. Researchers state that customer decisions to purchase a brand's product are based on five consumer values as follows:

- "Functional" value is the level of utility of the brand's product (or service) compared to alternative products. For example, customers seeking B-segment cars consider Hyundai Accent, Toyota Vios, Honda City, etc. With equivalent prices, buyers will consider factors such as interior design, exterior design, engine, horsepower, and fuel efficiency to make the final decision.

- "Social" value is seen as the willingness to please others and be accepted by society. Continuing with the above example, after considering functional values, car buyers will decide on a type of car that acquaintances or family members have used and praised; or have seen trusted independent reviews.

- "Emotional" value is reflected in customers' choices based on feelings and aesthetics. A brand with emotional value gives customers a sense of care, understanding, and loyalty. For example, a customer frequently visits a nearby coffee shop. That person will feel familiar when the staff greets them by name and immediately knows their usual drink. Surely, that customer will have a pleasant feeling about the store, the owner, and the staff and will be loyal to them.

- "Epistemic" value is used when consumers are always pursuing things related to novelty or knowledge-seeking behavior. For example, smartphone brands persuade conventional mobile phone users to switch to smartphones with new and interesting features.

- "Situational" value: consumers buy products or use services related to a set of different situations and contexts related to themselves. For example: on occasions such as Christmas, New Year, birthdays, weddings, engagements, etc., consumers decide what products to buy, what brands to choose for themselves, or as gifts for friends and loved ones.

9. Brand as a personality

Brand builders create "brand as a personality," meaning human traits and characteristics are attached to the brand to create a distinct identity. This concept, also known as "brand characteristics," helps shape how consumers perceive and connect with the brand. Just like individual humans, brands can have unique personalities that evoke emotions, values, and characteristics.

For example, Apple's brand personality is often associated with innovation, simplicity, and creativity. Apple is seen as a brand that always thinks differently, providing elegant and user-friendly products. Similarly, Coca-Cola's brand personality is usually fun, friendly, and inclusive. Hence, Coca-Cola's branding campaigns in Vietnam often revolve around festive occasions, creating happy, family-oriented, and nostalgic moments through their beverage products.

Aaker (1996)[(18)] describes brand personality as a metaphor "that can help brand strategists by enriching their understanding of people's perceptions and attitudes toward the brand, contributing to brand differentiation, achieving communication efforts, and creating brand value."

10. Brand as a relationship

The brand relationship is a continuation of brand personality. A brand with a personality not only helps consumers recognize it but also creates a relationship with the brand. "Brand as a relationship" means that the brand establishes and maintains relationships with customers, stakeholders, and the broader public. The method of building a brand relationship focuses on fostering connections, trust, and loyalty.

Some ways organizations typically build brand relationships include customer relationship management (CRM). Brands use CRM strategies to manage interactions and maintain long-term relationships with customers.

11. Brand as added value

The brand has been considered a set of tangible and intangible features that increase the attractiveness of a product or service beyond its functional value. Added value in branding refers to the benefits or additional values the brand provides to customers, which are special factors that differentiate the brand and attract customer interest. The difference between a brand and a commodity can be summarized in the phrase "added value." Organizations and businesses can create various added values based on their strengths.

Here are some examples of added value in branding. Added value in branding not only lies in product features but also includes factors related to customer experience, psychology, social values, and the unique differentiation that the brand brings.

A brand can create added value by committing to providing high-quality products or services. For example, Apple has built its brand by creating high-quality and stylishly designed technology products. Or a brand can create value by continuously innovating and offering creative solutions for customers. For example, Tesla has built its brand by creating modern and advanced electric cars.

Alternatively, a brand can create value by creating memorable experiences for customers. For example, Starbucks creates comfortable spaces and special dating environments for customers to enjoy coffee. A brand can create value by providing highly personalized products or services that meet the specific needs of individual customers. Another example is Nike allowing customers to customize and design their own shoes on their website. And a brand can create value by committing to social and environmental contributions, adhering to principles of fairness and ethics.

12. Brand as a developing entity

A brand is seen as a developing entity, not a static concept, as it also exists and evolves through continuous interaction with customers and the business environment of each organization or enterprise. Initially, the brand develops from unbranded goods, then is named for identification. Next, the brand develops into a "personality," associated with emotions in addition to product benefits. Thus, the brand gradually shifts from the company to the consumer. Furthermore, the brand, as a company/business, focuses on the unique aspects of the company that bring "brand value" to customers.

During development, a brand needs to change and adapt to market dynamics, trends, and customer needs. A brand can expand its product portfolio, broaden its target market, improve quality, innovate in design and technology, and even expand into new industries.

In summary, a brand also needs to build and maintain good relationships with customers and the community. Interaction and feedback from customers help the brand adjust and improve to meet customer needs and expectations. With continuous development and effective management, a brand can enhance its value and position itself in customers' minds, creating trust and positive interaction, thus creating a competitive advantage and differentiation in the market. The brand not only creates recognition and positioning but also brings benefits and added value to customers. It plays a crucial role in building trust, creating competitive advantages, and thriving in a competitive business environment./.

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