INCREASING BRAND RESONANCE BY IMPROVING BRAND SALIENCE-A STUDY OF 5 PRODUCT BRANDS OF HUL

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Abstract

Interacting with your customers in today's business world has become a must. Leading companies seek to build a strong base of loyal, profitable customers who are advocates for their products and services. The key to success is to fully understand the customers' needs and emotional expectations. The present study focuses on increasing brand resonance by improving brand salience. This is an empirical investigation on improving the consumer-brand relationship spectrum by focusing on strengthening the brand functions that make the brand more customer-centric. The present study draws its roots from the same milieu of using the digital space to engage the consumers and making them associate with the brand.

***Keywords:** Brand Resonance, Brand Salience, Emotional Connection and Digital Space.*

INTRODUCTION

Interacting with your customers in today's business world has become a must. Does this sound like too much of a strong statement? Well, maybe "must" somehow overplays what is today's reality, but it is indeed true, since all you hear marketers and advertisers talk about lately concerns interactive medias, how these are changing their panorama and how much are they gaining momentum. Leading companies seek to build a strong base of loyal, profitable customers who are advocates for their products and services. Given the vast number of customer interfaces, companies have to manage multiple channels, front-line employees and customer segments-the key challenge is to create the right buying experiences at the right time in the right way for the right cost. To complicate matters, customer experiences have emotional characteristics that companies historically haven't been good at delivering. The customer experience is more than an analysis of hard metrics about speed, availability and information. These performance measures are critical, but real progress in shaping the customer experience will come from addressing the emotional aspects of their interactions with the products or brands. The key to success is to fully understand the customers' needs and emotional expectations. By doing so, companies can build a customer-brand relationship.

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A brand serves various functions in terms of significant, purposeful and meaningful interactions with the consumer, thus building a relationship, but different interactions have different impacts on the consumers. Some interactions are very intensive, emotionally taxing, involved, time-consuming, enjoyable or otherwise very important to customers. Other interactions are mundane, unnoticed or otherwise unimportant. It is important for companies to differentiate between the significant and unproductive interactions, as this enables innovative companies to achieve two very distinct goals. Firstly, improve the customer experience where it counts and secondly, prioritize investment resources and efforts against only the most important interactions thereby enhancing the customer-brand relationship, and hence, increasing the ROI.

The present study focuses on improving the consumer-brand relationship spectrum by focusing on strengthening the brand functions that make the brand more customer-centric thereby improving the positioning of the brand in the minds of the consumers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Brand Resonance

Brand Resonance (Keller, 2003) refers to the extent to which customers feel "in sync" with the brand. Just as we feel the vibe between ourselves and others, we also experience a vibe that resonates between ourselves and brands. There are four categories to brand resonance:
1. Behavior - such as frequent purchase.
2. Attitude - when we say we "love" the brand.
3. Sense of community - such as the Harley Owner's Group (HOG).
4. Active engagement - where people invest time and money beyond purchase or consumption.

Resonance with clients and consumers is different for every brand. The good news is there is a brand for every customer, business and walk of life. The presence of social media and networking sites is proving this point better than any marketing researcher in history as organizations are witnessing instant feedback on their brands and campaigns.
Brand resonance can be defined as how well a brand connects with its customer both formally and casually. Creating resonance with a brand means that the brand message has to permeate consumers' minds and lives. More than ever, marketing needs to be impactful and emotive to create this type of resonance. While there is a formal brand presence defining what a company is, there is also a more casual side that says a brand is human. This is the way brands earn trust. Creating resonance means a brand offers consumers a solution to their unique problems by adding value. Brand resonance refers to the nature of the relationship that the customers have with the brand and the extent to which they feel that they are "in sync" with the brand (Aaker, 1997 and Keller, 2003).

Brand Salience: The importance

The most popular conceptualization of brand salience is as the accessibility or 'prominence' of the brand in buyer memory (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980; Alba and Chattopadhyay, 1986; Fazio, 1990). The first is a 'current' prominence whereby the very recently retrieved brand is in working memory. The second is the longer-run average accessibility from long-term memory It should be noted that we focus in this article on the latter, the accessibility from long-term memory. While it is possible that there is interest in the accessibility of the brand name under varying conditions (e.g. when viewing an ad, or when talking with friends), arguably situations of most interest for the vast majority of marketers are buying or media consumption situations (Keller and Davey, 2001). Therefore we are concerned with the 'prominence' of the brand when people making choices for brands or purchase decisions.

Brand Salience-- What is it?

Achieving the right brand identity involves creating brand salience with the customers. Brand Salience relates to aspects of the awareness of the brand, for example, how often and easily the brand is evoked under various situations or circumstances. Brand Salience is the degree to which the brand is thought about or noticed when a customer is in a buying situation. It is NOT the same thing as top of mind awareness. Top of mind awareness is simply what brands come to mind when consumers are asked to recall brands within a category. Brand Salience is different. Why? Because it is what brands come to mind when consumers are in a purchase situation. More specifically, Brand Salience is the memory of a brand and its linkage to other important memory structures. The buying situation "mindfulness" and linkage to memory structures is what differentiates Brand Salience from top of mind awareness.

Customer Centric Branding

Brand values must be calculated on an individual customer basis, and segment-specific brands need to be developed. There is a shift in focus from traditional product brand organizations to customer-segment focused organizations. Brand experience is finally the aggregate of consumer perceptions that come from interacting with a brand.

A successful brand experience is the process of exposing consumers to the various attributes associated with a particular brand and creates an environment in which the consumer will be surrounded by the positive elements attached to the brand. The overall brand experience represents a way to bring the consumer to the brand and establish a close relationship.

A brand means much more even than its product and service features. Brands are built from nothing less than the sum of a customer's experiences with a product, service or company. In effect, the brand experience moves a consumer up the ladder of loyalty from a mere consumer to a brand evangelist.

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The balance between expectation and experience is why we think of a brand as a promise, and the customer experience as the fulfillment of that promise. No doubt a customer experience that veers wildly from its brand promise will erode the belief in that brand promise pretty quickly. Companies that promise one thing through their advertising and branding and badly let customers down through the customer experience are undermining a huge investment and one of their most valuable assets. Any company that wants to establish a customer experience strategy must do it with a full and realistic evaluation of what their brand stands for and what their brand promise is. Any company that fails to align their customer experience strategy with their brand strategy will be in danger of creating an "experience gap" that will erode any brand equity they have built in the marketplace.

In other words, brands are multifaceted and complex-certainly much more than a name or image. If a consumer is not aware of a brand, they will never consider it even though it may be just what they want or need. First impressions and appearances are very important, and so is the quality of the foundation and building blocks, especially over the long term. Brands, like houses, have unique personalities. Customers develop relationships with brands that change over time as their needs and expectations evolve.

HUL and the Digital Paradigm- Innovative marketing Strategies for contemporary times

Back home, nobody is heralding the decline of the traditional hotshot marketer, but the writing is loud and clear on the Facebook wall: "Marketers who cannot see the kind of influence and deep engagement that the digital space has with consumers may as well get out of business," says managing director & CEO, HUL. Unilever's Marketing Academy is now taking every manager remotely associated with a brand through online social media courses. Recently, HUL organized a blogger's meet for its personal care brand Dove. Abhiroop C, head of media services at HUL, says social media is absolutely integral to HUL to tell the brand story and listen to what consumers have to say. "Consumers today are multi-tasking across mediums and we need a complete 360-degree plan to get our message across effectively. The biggest challenge for all marketers is not to treat social media just as an opportunity to show the consumer a banner advertisement. This is a medium where we must continuously interact with consumers".

The present study draws its roots from the same milieu of using the digital space to engage the consumers and making them associate with the brand, this can happen when the organization's can devise plans and framework and send messages in the right frame for making the brands more customer centric.

Research Gap

Previous studies have shown that CBK improves Brand Salience by increasing brand retrieval from the memory which is further enhanced by brand prominence in the consumer choice set.

Literature review has substantial studies conducted in the domain of Brand Salience and its relationship with Brand Resonance. Similarly, significant work has been previously conducted by enthusiastic researchers in the domain of Consumer Brand Knowledge. We

perceive a research gap in the context of the impact of enhancement of Consumer Brand Knowledge (CBK) on Brand Salience which has already proven to have a relationship with Brand Resonance. This is where we hope to position our research.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research steps
The present research study was carried out in two phases:
(i) Calculation of degree of customer centricity of five product brands of HUL.
(ii) Designing an Experiment for studying HUL's usage of the digital paradigm using a Product Brand Blog (Dove).

Calculation of degree of customer centricity of five product brands of HUL.
To calculate the customer centricity of the five product brands of Hindustan Unilever Limited (HUL), we calculated the Brand Customer Centricity Score (BCCS) using the brand customer centricity calculator (BCCC), developed as part of our previous research (Sinha, Ahuja and Medury, 2010). The calculator as shown below, calculates the scores that can help organizations to analyze the degree of customer centricity in their brands.

Brand Customer Centricity Calculator=

$$(BCCS) = \sum_{}^{n} (0.21 {*} EC_i + 0.12 {*} LI_i + 0.11 {*} EBP_i + 0.20 {*} CBK_i + 0.11 {*} T_i + 0.11 {*} RC_i)$$

Brand-Customer Centricity Calculator is perceived as the sum total of the following determinants:
i=the individual attributes under each function.
n=total number of attributes under each function.
where;
EC_i=Emotional Connection;
LI_i=My lifestyle and Image;
EBP_i=Enhances My Brand Perception;
CBK_i= Consumer Brand Knowledge;
T_i=Trust;
RC_i= Responsible towards consumer

Sampling of Brands
All brands of HUL are divided into six categories-
(i) Food Brands (ii) Home Care Brands
(iii) Personal Care Brands
(iv) Water (v) Nutrition
(vi) Health, Hygiene and Beauty
For the purpose of the current study, the five brands belonging to Hindustan Unilever Limited (HUL) Personal Care Brand range, were chosen. These were - Dove, Breeze, Lux, Pears and Hamam.

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Data Collection

The data for the study was calculated using a focus group. The focus groups (comprising of 30 respondents) for the purpose of the study, were chosen in an intricate manner. Care was taken to choose consumers of the brand as focus group members. This was maintained as a basic premise for all the five brands chosen for this research study. Three factors were the qualifying criteria for the respondents to be a part of the focus group:
1.   The respondent should have been using the brand.
2.   The frequency of the usage should have been at least one purchase a month.
3.   Length of association with the brand should have been at least 1 year or more.

The demographic factors like age and gender etc. were ignored for this research process. The objective of this intricate research study was to validate the Brand Customer Centricity Calculator by comparing the Brand Customer Centricity Scores (BCCS) across different product brands under the umbrella of one parent brand and subsequently studying the brand's performance from the consumer perspective across the six brand functions.

As per the literature review, the brands will benefit if they are customer centric (Aaker and Keller, 1996), the index of the same being higher BCCS. Hence by studying the brand's performance across the brand functions, organizations can formulate specific strategies to improve the brand performance where it is found lacking. Subsequently the Brand Customer Centricity scores were calculated. The interpretation of the same has been discussed in detail in the section on Results and Findings.

Experiment Design, Data Collection and Analysis

An experiment was designed using a Product Brand Blog (Dove) of HUL where a set of participants were exposed to the blog for a fixed duration and variations in their Consumer Brand Knowledge Levels were subsequently calculated. A simulated lab environment was created where a set of consumers were exposed to the brand blog for a period of ten minutes. The variations in levels of consumer brand knowledge were calculated. The following steps were followed-

(i)   A pre-test was conducted to measure baseline levels of Consumer brand knowledge (CBK) and scores were tabulated. It has been observed that a time lag between pre-test and post-test makes subjects more responsive towards various information avenues that supply similar information. This results in an increase in Consumer brand knowledge (CBK) from sources other than the blog.In this paper we analyze the improvement in Consumer brand knowledge by exposure of the consumer to a corporate blog.

(ii)   The respondents were asked to answer the questions (Figure 1) related to the chosen product brand, before exposure to the blog. Subsequently the pre CBK scores were calculated.

(iii) The respondents were then exposed to the Dove's blog for a period of ten minutes.

(iv)   The respondents were then again asked the same questions about the Brand. Subsequently, the post CBK scores were tabulated (Table II).

(v)   Next step was to calculate the difference between the pre and the post scores. (Post-Pre). The same was used to calculate the delta values (post-pre/pre) (Table II).

To ensure that the blog is the sole source of information that affects the change, the pre-test is immediately followed by the blog exposure. A stimulated lab experiment which involved a timed exposure to the blog for duration of ten minutes was conducted. There was a strong focus towards maintaining uniformity in human computer interaction factors. The screen (Figure 1) was created to map the consumer brand knowledge (pre score) for the given (Dove) product blog. Similar screens were created for the remaining 4 product blogs of HUL for the purpose of calculation of the consumer brand knowledge score (Pre and Post).

Figure 1: Sample questions for mapping the CBK Levels for Dove.

Dove

Q1) Are you aware of the Dove's Campaign for "Real Women"?
  ● Yes   ○ No
Q2) Are you aware of the range of Personal hygiene products of Dove?
  ● Yes   ○ No
Q3) Are you aware of Dove's Campaign for "Real Beauty"?
  ● Yes   ○ No
Q4) Are you aware of Dove's "Anti- Ageing Campaign"?
  ● Yes   ○ No
Q5) Are you aware of the Dove's campaign for evolution of real beauty?
  ● Yes   ○ No
Q6) Are you aware of Dove's campaign for "Self Esteem"?
  ● Yes   ○ No
Q7) Are you aware of Dove's Men Care Range of Products?
  ● Yes   ○ No
Q8) Are you aware Dove's celebration of "Good Hair Day Campaign?
  ● Yes   ○ No
Q9) Are you aware of Dove's "Revive Online Campaign?
  ● Yes   ○ No
Q10) Are you aware of Dove's campaign for "AD Makeover using Facebook"?
  ● Yes   ○ No

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Table 1: Variations Observed in CBK Levels

Customer	Dove Pre	Post	Post-Pre	post prel/pre Δ Cbk	Breeze Pre	Post	Post-Pre	post prel/pre Δ Cbk	Hamam Pre	Post	Post-Pre	post prel/pre Δ Cbk	Pears Pre	Post	Post-Pre	post prel/pre Δ Cbk	Lux Per	Post	Post-Pre	post prel/pre Δ Cbk
C1	2	7	5	2.50	3	9	6	2.00	5	9	4	0.80	4	10	6	1.50	1	7	6	6.00
C2	5	7	2	0.40	3	9	6	2.00	3	8	5	1.67	3	7	4	1.33	2	5	3	1.50
C3	3	9	6	2.00	3	7	4	1.33	3	10	7	2.33	2	8	6	3.00	3	6	3	1.00
C4	4	7	3	0.75	4	7	3	0.75	5	9	4	0.80	3	7	4	1.33	2	10	8	4.00
C5	5	9	4	0.80	4	9	5	1.25	5	8	3	0.60	4	9	5	1.25	3	8	5	1.67
C6	5	7	2	0.40	4	8	4	1.00	2	8	6	3.00	2	10	8	4.00	2	9	7	3.50
C7	3	9	6	2.00	2	9	7	3.50	3	8	5	1.67	3	10	7	2.33	2	6	4	2.00
C8	5	8	3	0.60	2	8	6	3.00	4	8	4	1.00	4	9	5	1.25	15	9	75	5.00
C9	3	8	5	1.67	3	8	5	1.67	4	7	3	0.75	3	7	4	1.33	3	6	3	1.00
C10	3	9	6	2.00	5	10	5	1.00	5	8	3	0.60	5	6	1	0.20	2	7	5	2.50
C11	5	10	5	1.00	4	8	4	1.00	3	8	5	1.67	2	10	8	4.00	3	7	4	1.33
C12	5	8	3	0.60	3	8	5	1.67	2	10	8	4.00	3	8	5	1.67	2	8	6	3.00
C13	5	6	1	0.20	4	9	5	1.25	4	9	5	1.25	4	6	2	0.50	2	10	8	4.00
C14	4	9	5	1.25	4	9	5	1.25	3	10	7	2.33	2	7	5	2.50	3	8	5	1.67
C15	3	8	5	1.67	4	10	6	1.50	3	6	3	1.00	3	8	5	1.67	1	6	5	5.00
C16	5	7	2	0.40	4	9	5	1.25	5	7	2	0.40	4	7	3	0.75	2	8	6	3.00
C17	4	9	5	1.25	4	8	4	1.00	3	10	7	2.33	4	7	3	0.75	2	5	3	1.50
C18	5	8	3	0.60	3	9	6	2.00	3	9	6	2.00	4	9	5	1.25	3	6	3	1.00
C19	3	8	5	1.67	5	7	2	0.40	2	8	6	3.00	2	10	8	4.00	2	8	6	3.00
C20	2	9	7	3.50	2	8	6	3.00	4	6	2	0.50	3	9	6	2.00	2	95	75	3.75
C21	3	7	4	1.33	3	7	4	1.33	4	10	6	1.50	4	9	5	1.25	2	6	4	2.00
C22	5	6	1	0.20	4	8	4	1.00	2	7	5	2.50	3	7	4	1.33	3	6	3	1.00
C23	3	7	4	1.33	5	8	3	0.60	4	8	4	1.00	4	9	5	1.25	2	7	5	2.50
C24	4	6	2	0.50	4	10	6	1.50	5	10	5	1.00	3	7	4	1.33	2	6	4	2.00
C25	3	8	5	1.67	3	7	4	1.33	2	6	4	2.00	2	8	6	3.00	25	9	65	2.60
C26	3	9	6	2.00	3	8	5	1.67	4	9	5	1.25	4	9	5	1.25	2	5	3	1.50
C27	3	7	4	1.33	5	8	3	0.60	3	7	4	1.33	4	7	3	0.75	2	9	7	3.50
C28	4	9	5	1.25	3	8	5	1.67	5	6	1	0.20	2	8	6	3.00	2	7	5	2.50
C29	4	10	6	1.50	4	9	5	1.25	3	9	6	2.00	5	6	1	0.20	15	10	85	5.67
C30	4	7	3	0.75	5	7	2	0.40	4	8	4	1.00	4	7	3	0.75	2	7	5	2.50
Mean score				1.24				1.44				1.52				1.69				2.71

RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS
Brand Customer Centricity

Table 2: Comparative Analysis of Brand Customer Centricity Scores across product brands of HUL

Brand/Product	Brand Functions (EC_i)	(LI_i)	(EBP_i)	(CBK_i)	(T_i)	(RC_i)	BCCS
Dove	0.68	0.48	0.44	0.48	0.46	0.34	2.88
Breeze	0.40	0.23	0.38	0.25	0.42	0.32	2.00
Lux	0.71	0.42	0.46	0.69	0.47	0.32	3.08
Pears	0.65	0.42	0.46	0.65	0.48	0.32	3.09
Hamam	0.45	0.31	0.34	0.58	0.35	0.33	2.37

Interpretation of consumer responses for personal care brands

Out of the five personal care brands of HUL, Lux appears to be the most Customer Centric Brand. It's strength lies in its very high Emotional Connection with its consumers, its high score on Life Style and very high CBK-all this is a function of well designed offline and online strategies directed towards the consumers.

1. HUL has consistently invested in the brand equity of Lux, which has subsequently created some knowledge structures in the consumers' minds. A series of well directed marketing campaigns and advertisements featuring bollywood's top actresses has intrinsically catered to the fairer sex, thereby catering to the Lifestyle quotient of the consumers. This has subsequently created strong, favorable, and unique brand associations. It's ground-breaking endeavors, venturing with various brand associations, be it a 'Coffee Table Book' or 'A Lux Couture Show' at the Lakme Fashion Week or coming up with a 'Chocolate seduction soap' are other feathers in its cap.

2. Dove's high emotional connection score is a result of the persuasive ability of a series of consumer testimonial based advertising campaigns catering to the premium consumer. It's face test campaign has positioned Dove as the keeper of promises. Enabling everyday women to share their real experiences online at the Dove website has contributed to its high score on the Trust function, but there seems to be sizeable scope of improvement in the dimension of Consumer-Brand Knowledge.

3. Pears being the oldest brand, is trusted for being gentle, and is recommended by doctors and pediatricians worldwide. HUL has always supported the brand with careful advertising. The brand is promoted with the positioning as Pure and Gentle soap. The transparency of the soap acts as the visual cue for purity and the glycerin content as the sign for gentleness, subsequently the marketing messages highlight the virtue of the soap using Mother and Child as the central theme thereby appealing to the emotions of the target market. Hence Pears scores significantly on the functions of emotional connection, brand perception and lifestyle.

4. Hamam is a typical example of such a strategy of building a strong brand image to appeal to the consumers. Hamam has captured the consumer's mind space by building around itself an image of Honesty and Protection even while it is seen that the product itself offers scope for very little unique or differentiating features which would ensure that a consumer remains loyal to the brand because given the plethora of players in this market any new successful variant would be instantly taken up by the competitors too. It scores low on the brand functions of lifestyle and perception as it is positioned for enhancing family appeal and the advertising campaigns are derived from simple everyday moments of life. More investments in well directed marketing strategies can help the brand improve on the functions of CBK, Trust and Lifestyle.

5. Breeze scores low on all the five brand functions and shows visible scope of improvements across all dimensions.

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HUL and the Digital Media

The variation in the consumer knowledge scores is indicative of change in the consumers information and association pertaining to a brand. The cognitive associations between consumer and brand are a function of the consumer's assimilation of knowledge pertaining to the brand, and hence it is in the organization's interest to focus on areas whereby the consumer knowledge levels can be enhanced.

Customer orientation and innovative thinking have been cited as the basis for best business performance (Paulin et al., 2000). Core purpose and values of the company and the brands is important as everything an organization does, including the innovation strategy is founded on that core purpose of meaningfully improving the every day lives of consumers. Even with commodities, there are quite a few parameters which brands can use to position themselves to capture a place in the consumer's memory and consequently in their shopping basket. A few of the more widely accepted of them are: Consistency of Product Quality, Customization of the product to the extent possible, Providing a wider range of products, Identifying the most profit generating segments of the market and modifying or adding an offering to cater to their specific needs, Unique packaging, Emotional Branding and even basing branding on building a unique image to the extent of professing to have a brand personality. In fact focusing on getting consumers to build an emotional identification with the brand and its personality has a far longer lasting effect and builds far greater loyalty than focusing on just functional and utility attributes which a competitor would also able to easily match if not surpass.

IMPLICATIONS FOR ORGANIZATIONS

A higher assimilation of brand related knowledge results in improvement of Consumer sentiment pertaining to the brand. It is in the organizational interest that ways and means are developed to increase the consumer's knowledge with regard to product or brand. Organizations can successfully leverage brand blogs to engage consumers, build a bond with them, and then subsequently increase their knowledge about organization/product/brand. Developing higher levels of blog interactivity will be useful in this context. Subsequent improvements in consumer knowledge pertaining to the brands will result in faster product adoption by the consumers.

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