

The power of branding

I've had lots of occasion this past week to think about branding as I led writing groups for a business school class on marketing. The undergrads had to write a marketing paper dealing with some sort of marketing strategy. Most of them wrote about "brand extension," where a new product is introduced under the existing brand name. The students had a bit of trouble relating theory to real world practice, but if anyone doubts the power of marketing and branding, they should look no further than this article in yesterday's *Washington Post*. The article talks about how exposure to certain brands (Coke is one of them) actually fires up areas in the brain that are also akin to RELIGIOUS experience. Why? Because marketers have spent years creating messaging that forms emotional connections for the brand. Of course, Coke is the prime example. I think it has the highest (here's another marketing term) brand equity of all brands. Its logo is instantly recognizable, and they have had a particularly successful marketing campaign. When we think of Coke we may think "a Coke and a smile" or Santa or fuzzy bears or any number of campaigns designed to appeal to our emotions. The bottom line is that good marketing and branding do work to create positive associations.

Most everything that we are exposed to through the media has a (yet another marketing term) brand essence or personality. We associate certain behaviors/attributes/lifestyles/etc. to certain brands/products/people and countries? At least Howard Fineman of *Newsweek* seems to think that countries have brand personalities. And perhaps they do. However, he writes that Barack Obama is engaging in a branding exercise for the United States simply by the choices he's making for cabinet positions. Although I agree with the premise, I think Fineman is a bit sketchy on the details.

Bottom line: branding works. When something is not well known,

it is because that something does not have a strong brand identity. Branding works for products (how many people out there have a preference Coke versus Pepsi versus store cola?) and it works for organizations. Apparently, branding also works for countries (let's see...England is traditional, some might say stodgy, Iran, more apt to incite violence, New Zealand has lots of dairy...).

On coupons and reinventing your product

Clipping coupons is a sometimes denigrated activity which nonetheless helps thousands of Americans keep to their grocery budgets. In this sense, coupons play a significant role in marketing communications. Many people buy the product for which they can get the best price, and coupons (especially in stores that double their face value) can help lower prices. So, for example, if you are shopping for detergent, and you have a 50-cent coupon for Tide and a 75-cent coupon for Purex, you may decide to buy Purex, either as a trial or because it will be cheaper.

Manufacturers also use coupons to introduce products and to stimulate sales. And, often, I think, they use coupons to experiment with campaigns. After all, coupons are traceable. You can gauge if something is working just by the number of coupons that are redeemed.

Today I saw an interesting juxtaposition of coupons for Palmolive Dishwashing Liquid. One was for traditional Palmolive (you know, the green stuff that claims to save your hands from the harshness of doing dishes) and for "New

Palmolive Pure + Clear.” This new product claims to have no unnecessary chemicals, no heavy fragrances, non-irritating dyes and no harmful residue on dishes.” This is from the same people who manufacture the other Palmolive. Are they saying that regular Palmolive has unnecessary chemicals, irritating dyes and leaves harmful residue???? Do you see how this is dangerous for the Palmolive brand? Although I applaud them for their new product I think that this where branding can be defeated. If you introduce a new product that in a sense contradicts your existing product, you should use a different brand, right? Or, is the thought process that the brand is strong and now they can provide an alternative for people looking for a less chemically harsh dish liquid? Will this lead eventually to a complete change in the Palmolive brand? I really wonder. Also, do people think about the ads or do they just take it at face value?

What do you think?