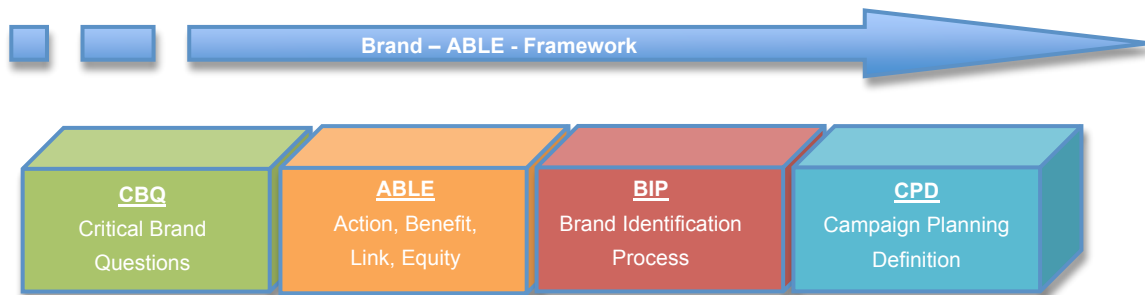

The Brand-ABLE Framework™

Articulating and implementing a strategic brand framework for sustainable market advantage

By: David Frederick, MBA

As global organizations try to build sustainable competitive advantage from their brand or branding initiatives, the need for a dynamic and flexible framework to build that brand and position is crucial. Where most companies fail is in defining the fundamental elements of their brand and asking the right questions to craft a compelling brand position. This is where the Brand-ABLE Framework comes in.

Like many frameworks, the Brand-ABLE Framework is broken into four core modules. Each of these modules are query based, specifically designed to challenge you to ask very specific and difficult questions. These questions will help you gather the appropriate insight and data you need to build an effective brand strategy.



Understanding Your Target Customer

Research has clearly shown through many years of studying consumer behavior that branding is based on irrational logic or emotion. Not specifications, quality, or other feature centric parameters -- simple, human emotion. Which as we know, is not so simple. In order to tap into and leverage or even influence this irrational logic and emotion, you must first understand your target customer. This means that when tapping into a target customer's logic and emotion, it needs to be simply boiled down to really understanding what motivates them. For example, what are their interests...today and tomorrow? What drives their emotion and experience? What demographics are they in? What segment are you trying to connect with? Is your brand a lifestyle statement? The four modules of the Brand-ABLE Framework help you to answer these questions and truly understand your target customer.

The CBQ Module – Critical Brand Questions

Start by asking and understanding the questions in the three core question segments in the CBQ module: Brand Position, Brand Loyalty, and Brand Promise. These are questions that all brand, advertising, and marketing executives must ask to fully understand the target customer segment and how their brand and products/services interact with their customer target. Understanding this type of core foundation data helps you craft not only your brand, but all the intrinsic and intangible artifacts associated with your brand and subsequent strategy.

Critical Brand Questions

BRAND POSITION	BRAND LOYALTY	BRAND PROMISE
How do I become relevant?	How do I lock in brand loyalty?	What does my brand stand for?
How do I break through the noise and clutter in the market place?	How do I connect with my customers?	What am I promising my customers?
How do I dynamically and holistically reach my customers?	How do I endear customer loyalty to my brand and product?	What do my customers expect from my brand?
Where is the most appropriate place to position my brand and associated strategy?		What do my customers think my brand promise is?

Answering these questions lead you to a clear understanding of your target customers. They require you to narrow your focus on what your brand will stand for and help you start to develop what your brand will ultimately mean to your customers.

Once you have the answers to these questions, you have set the stage and architectural framework for an informed analysis and position. But remember, sometimes it's your customers who end up defining your brand, post product release. This type of behavior starts to mirror the Lead User Method of Innovation. *For more information on Lead User Innovation, you should reference MIT's Dr. Eric Von Hippel and his work. Specifically his acclaimed book Democratizing Innovation.*

Once you have gathered the answers and data points based on these questions, you are now ready to move to the next module of the framework: the ABLE module.

The ABLE Module – Attention, Benefit, Link, and Equity

ABLE is an acronym for **A**ttention, **B**enefit, **L**ink and **E**quity -- the foundation pillars of the framework.

ATTENTION: What do you do to garner attention? What are your customer targets looking for in your brand or similar brand? What does your brand say? Who does it say it to? How will people recognize your brand? Iconic? What is the experience you want your customers to have? What experience do they want to have? How do you break through all the noise and become noticeable and desired and more importantly remembered?

BENEFIT: What is the benefit that the customer will have by purchasing and using your brand, product or service? Simply - what's the benefit to the customer? Why would they want your product or service? Is it emotion? Status? Convenience? All the things we derived from the CBQ.

LINK: How do you link your product or service to an experience that is enticing, appealing, pleasing, comforting, and/or beneficial to the customer? Linking your brand to emotion is one of the most powerful ways in which to "connect" with your customer.

EQUITY: How do you build equity in your brand so that it endures? ...so that it survives market trends that change at the speed of light? Think Nike, Coke, Apple, Sony, Levi, etc. Remember these are more than products, they are brands. The product ends up being the vehicle in which to experience the brand.

By focusing on these areas and asking these questions, you have now gathered very compelling data and a high level road map for the next module. BIP - Brand Identification Process. But before we tackle the BIP, lets briefly discuss the Target Customer.

A Further Note on Target Customers

While not directly a part of the Brand-ABLE Framework, I would suggest that you be culturally engaged and intellectually curious in regards to target consumers. Why is this important? Remember, what works for one demo, psycho, or ethno graphic, may not work for all and in some cases be counter-productive and downright damaging to your brand. This issue also applies geographic regions.

Here is a perfect example of not being in tune or culturally engaged. Back when Electrolux was attempting to enter the North American market, they were exploring marketing and brand positions in which to introduce their products, as you would expect from any responsible company trying to enter a new market. Even though Electrolux was a European company, it had plenty of English speaking employees. So, understanding the target market region's language was not a problem. Or was it?

When Electrolux finally released their banner market position and brand slogan in North America it read like this – "If it sucks, it must be Electrolux!". Brilliant! Makes sense right? Great suction unlike other vacuums of the day. It must be the best! It must be Electrolux! But that's not what the slogan said. It took corporate marketing a little while to figure out why this carefully crafted slogan wasn't working. Granted, it's definitely got a nice rhyme, but it clearly was not the message they wanted to send to North American consumers.

Of course, the reason it didn't work was because Electrolux did not understand how to effectively communicate and create an experience that would work. Just because you can speak and understand a region's language doesn't mean what you say translates to the consumer. Clearly, "If it sucks" does not communicate a positive brand experience for the consumer.

Now, I know you have read this a thousand times in every branding and marketing book and article that ever came out or will ever probably come out, but its truism. And like all good truisms, it became a truism because it's true and has been tested over time. It goes something like this: *Brands are not born, they are built. If built right, they endure. Built wrong, they disappear forever.* There is a catch here though. If you have a really bad product, its brand could live on through history as an example of something awful. Think Edsel, Allegany Airlines (remember Agony Airlines?) Toilet Taco Fast-Acting Laxatives, and Dr. Poon's Meatless Health Steaks. Yes, these were all real brands. In fact, there are so many of them you could write a book about them. In fact, I am sure someone probably has.

But in our case, and that specifically of the Brand-ABLE Framework, great brands are built by asking and understanding the CBQ and ABLE parts of the framework. While not part of the framework, this little nugget of knowledge is also a key query in crafting your brand strategy: *Know your brand champion.* There is always a market sub-group that is extremely passionate about the type of product or service you offer. Identify and engage them. There are so many ways in which to engage today with mobile, OOH, direct marketing, web, etc., there is absolutely no excuse to not connect and engage. These people are your champions and can delivery tremendous ROM (return on marketing) and word-of-mouth effect. Understand what role your brand plays in their life. Why is it important to them? How do they use it? When do they use it? Have they adapted it? Adaptation could lead you to new innovations through lead user innovation!

Champion your brand's point of difference. What's unique about it? What's own-able about it? Is the experience own-able? Understand your brand's key drivers. Find key touch points. Is it through the internet or mobile, or both? Broadcast? Viral? Word-of-mouth? Creative? Intellectual? Identify or actually create or identify the key problems facing your customer, then tell them where to go to get the solution. This is where the power of a brand can be harnessed and exploded into success. In many cases, passionate consumers of a brand are your best sources of ideas, market trends, value points, and more. They can also make or break your brand. Leverage this powerful connection and experience. Remember, like all advertising, it must be consistent, clear, and have continuity. I call these the three Cs. Tell the customer in their language why your brand is important to them. Now, let's continue with the next module of the Brand-ABLE framework.

The BIP Module – Brand Identification Process

Once you have answered the questions identified and asked in the CBQ and ABLE modules, considered the material covered thus far, and captured the data, you are ready for the next step: defining your brand architecture. This is the Brand Identification Process or BIP Module. In this module, you are presented with rules and guidelines to use when structuring your brand strategy. They are as follows:

- **Ensure a common Brand Strategy.** Your brand is stronger if it has common elements.
- **Focus your Brand Initiative.** Who? What? When? Where? How? What Medium?
- **Define your Brand Promise.** Define in less than 5 words what your Brand Promise is.
- **Identify your Brand Target** i.e., demographic, ethno-graphic, geography, etc.
- **Identify what your Brand Delivery will be to the customer** i.e., experience? information? Value?
- **Brand Placement.** Where, how, and when to place your brand.
- **Intimately understand your consumers and what motivates them.** Why are they attracted to your brand? Particularly over other brands.
- **Surround the consumer.** Print, Web, Broadcast, POP, Mobile, Digital Merchandising. This may sound at odds with the focus component, but when you understand all the artifacts and data from the –Brand-ABLE Framework, you need to deploy them.

The CPD Module – Campaign Planning Definition

Finally, the last component of a successful and strong brand strategy and the last module in the Brand-ABLE Framework requires planning out demonstrable and quantitative objectives. This is accomplished through the CPD module - Campaign Planning Definition.

1. **Clearly define your brand campaign objectives** and how you will measure the results.
2. **Clearly define your campaign and brand ideas.** Write them down, brain storm them, but get them together.
3. **Select your touch points** – How are you going to communicate with your customers? Print, Bill-board, Broadcast, Mobile, Web, etc.
4. **Execute creatively** – All the frameworks, books, concepts and theories are useless unless you execute and measure. Use creative ways in which to execute your plans. Think outside the box. Leverage your lead users and brand champions to help lead you to where the market is and where its going.
5. **Establish growth execution objectives** – Use the 70/20/10 Rule. 70% Proven Brand Drivers - 20% Expand to connect - 10% Dedicated i.e., word-of-mouth/Brand Champions. These are the measurements of brand success. Of course, like all things marketing, things change. But the 70/20/10 Rule is a solid baseline in which to benchmark.

The four modules (**CBQ, ABLE, BIP** and **CPD**) of the Brand-ABLE Framework, should provide you with enough questions, guidelines, data, and critical thinking to create, structure, and execute a successful brand strategy regardless of the type of product or service you offer. But as I mentioned above, all advertising requires creativity, consistency, and continuity. Without these, you put your brand strategy at risk.

Like most things in life, the more you know the more you can make better and more informed decisions. This is no different when it comes to branding and marketing. You have avenues available today that the marketers of just 10 years ago would have killed to leverage. Engage in critical market research, psycho-graphics, entho-graphics, behavioral patterns, social media outlets and more. They can all provide near real-time insight into what your consumers are doing and thinking. Your job as a brand innovator and strategist is to craft a creative, effective and sustainable brand that delivers success for both you and your customer.

Conclusion

The Brand-ABLE Framework will help you architect an effective, sustainable and dynamic brand strategy. Finally, let me conclude with two golden rules and several points for consideration.

Golden rule #1: Branding is not a static constant. In today's world, it is dynamic.

What does that really mean? Branding is dynamic principle. We live in a dynamic world and in the marketing world it is no different. Now, I know many of you may be saying, doesn't that contradict the general premise of a Brand, the constant, consistent (static) impression, statement, feeling, emotion, experience, etc. of a product or service - picture Nike? The answer is no. Which brings us to the next golden rule.

Golden rule #2: Like all advertising, consistency, continuity and frequency ensure that your "brand" or message is always in front of the consumer, building familiarity and recognition. Remember the old saying, out of sight, out of mind. If your brand, product, or service is out of sight, you're done.

Where these points get really interesting is in applying the Brand-ABLE Framework in the 21st Century digital age where the proliferation of marketing and communication mediums in which to expose your Brand is virtually unlimited and unparalleled. This is a blessing and a curse. But that's a different topic and paper. However, it's in this backdrop that I want to share these final points to ponder and consider.

- **Branding is about soft power.** Remember, it's not the "hard things" - tangibles like bricks and mortar, equipment, inventories - that contribute the most to a company's value. It's the "soft things" - the brand, intellectual property, the company's reputation, ideas, consumer relationships, experiences, and alliances.
- **Branding and soft power effect us everyday** because they influence how we feel about something. Remember - Emotion.
- **Branding is about emotion and experience.** Research shows that few of us make the final decision to buy something after carefully testing and considering the merits and specs of the different brands in the market, even if it's more expensive. People buy on the emotion and customer experience they have with your items. Think Apple and BMW. People buy as a result of how they feel about the item or how the item makes them feel.
- **To harness the real power of a brand,** you must leverage the benefits of soft power - strategy, innovation, tactics, images, rich media identity, words and verbal identity, viability and reputation. All of these things help attract people to your brand and what it is you are trying to get them to experience or feel (emotion again).
- **Brand success depends on what other people feel and experience** about your company.
- **Branding is a strategic process** that should be considered over the long haul and continually adjusted to maximize your position, customer experience, and feeling. Keep it dynamic, not static.
- **Branding is the process of differentiating your product and services** in the global market from the competition and taking the innovative steps in which to execute your brand strategy.
- **Brands win hands down over products and services.** A branded item is viewed better than a generic counterpart. Think IPOD vs. Creative Labs Zen. Brands are perceived (emotion again) as of higher quality and value. Brands are in demand. They sell for a premium. Think pharmaceuticals – generic vs. brand.
- **Generic or weakly branded** items only end up competing on price - commodity. Powerful brands create a premium, or perceived premium, which at the register and checkout line actually becomes a premium where you derive more revenue or better margins for your item.
- **In Branding, the number one thing to remember is to be different.** Copying, while sometimes flattering, is imitation and imitation is generic. A commodity. B player. You want to be authentic, the real thing, or the consumer will see right through your genuine artificial brand.

Final Thoughts

As we have seen, to create, manage and execute an effective brand strategy, there are many ingredients that make up the strategy. Skip any one and you could end up with an ineffective and costly mistake. Many companies, even ones with powerful brands, forget that branding is more than your name, vibe, logo, emotion, identity or image. A truly successful brand is made from everything you do to differentiate and market your goods, such as messaging, presentation, customer experience, emotional connections, communication, and creative marketing tactics. A powerful brand is a living breathing thing. If you don't feed it, take care of it, groom it, nurture and support it, it will die. Along with your business. It's also important to remember that these points on branding, including the framework discussed herein, are not industry centric. They apply to all business, services and products, but don't take my word for it, see what other industry leaders say:

“An organization can only ‘walk the talk’ when its managers deliberately shape its internal reality to align with its brand promise...(the brand’s) values must be internalized by the organization, shaping its instinctive attitudes, behaviors, priorities, etc.” - Alan Mitchell, “Out of the Shadows” Journal of Marketing Management 15, No. 1-3, January-April 1999: 25-42

“Never underestimate the power of design to differentiate.” - David Reyes-Guerra, Manager of Corporate Identity & Product Naming, Xerox

“Most importantly, a brand must be endearing.” - Barry Krause, President, Publicis & Hal Riney

“If this business were split up, I would give you the land and bricks and mortar, and I would take the brands and trademarks, and I would fare better than you.” - John Stuart, former CEO of Quaker Oats

“A brand should strive to own a word in the mind of the consumer.” “The crucial ingredient in the success of any brand is its claim to authenticity.” - Al Reis and Laura Reis, from *The 22 Immutable Laws of BRANDING*.

Lessons learned from building Dewar’s World of Whisky in Aberfeldy, Scotland:

Value your brand’s heritage, Seduce and romance your customers, Promote brand exploration and discovery, Create the pre- and post-visit experience - Neil Boyd, Marketing Director, John Dewar & Sons, Glasgow

“To uncover hidden category needs, don’t ask ‘How can I differentiate my brand from its competition?’ but rather ask ‘What are the unmet needs that no brand is addressing?’” - Janine Keogh, Category Insights Director, North American Brands, Kraft Canada Inc.

About the Author

In addition to being the founder and executive leader of Innovation Management Group, Frederick is a seasoned senior executive with over 25 years experience in the global technology, executive management, consulting, VC & Private Equity funding, marketing, branding, innovation, media and interactive business industries. He is a recognized leader on the convergence of interactive media, interactive marketing and branding, adver-gaming, and has been a key speaker on numerous industry round tables. He is also a recognized author on such topics as innovation, content development, strategic management, marketing and business process.

In addition to his executive background, Frederick has served as an Adjunct Professor, Executive MBA Program for Norwich University, sits on the Piedmont Community College Interactive Gaming Program Advisory Board, is a member of and contributor to the IGDA (International Game Developers Association) Intellectual Property Rights Committee and their released IPR White Paper, a member G-SAM (Global Society of Asset Management), as well as a member of the Council of Communications Advisors – Media and Entertainment.

Frederick earned a BS in International Business and an MBA from Weston Reserve University and holds certificate's in Strategic Technology Negotiation from Harvard Law School's Program on Negotiation, numerous executive certificates as well as an Executive Graduate Certificate in Strategy and Innovation from the MIT Sloan School of Management (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) and is currently working towards his PhD in Behavioral and Policy Sciences with a specialization in Innovation and Entrepreneurship.



Sources & Notes:

Author - David Frederick

Eric Von Hippel, Democratizing Innovation, MIT Press 2006

Quotes gathered from Google search of "quotes on branding"

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