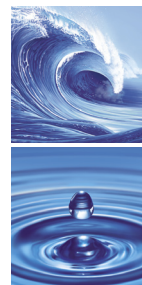


Making the product the hero

What do consumers really want from brands and how do marketers establish an intense customer-brand relationship? Is it just about emotions? A recent study shows that it also means fulfilling the consumer's need for an intense experience. By Greet Sterenberg



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“Each time the question is the same – why Lacoste? And each time it’s the same answer: I take off my polo shirt and I ask the person who dares to ask me this question to try it on. Then they understand what you feel when the soft weave of the fabric caresses your skin.”

This French consumer is not a Lacoste employee. He wasn’t asked to praise the brand: he was simply talking to an interviewer about something he loves and relates to intensely. Many consumers have these kind of intense connections with brands, but how are they formed, and how can marketers take advantage of them?

To find out what consumers really want from brands, Research International conducted a qualitative study, talking to 1,200 people in 43 countries, selecting individuals who said they had a ‘high intensity connection’ with at least one brand. It soon became apparent that there’s no such thing as a specifically ‘high intensity brand’. Almost any brand can make this kind of connection with a consumer – respondents talked about mass-market brands as well as prestige ones, and both global and local names were mentioned.

Similarly, it’s not just a certain kind of consumer who makes high-intensity brand connections. The study featured people of every demographic. However the kind of relationships people form does vary: there are definite regional differences in the way consumers approach brands, and some of the most intensely personal connections with brands are most commonly formed later in life.

These connections are based not on a brand’s social cachet or display value but centre on the intense experience of actually using the brand. In the Lacoste quote – the consumer knows that the only way he can show why he wears Lacoste is to offer his questioner the physical experience of wearing the shirt. It’s not a question of aspiration, or brand image, it comes down to the feeling of cloth on skin.

Swell of concern

In recent years marketers’ focus has been very much on the emotional side of branding – creating brand promises and images that have strong emotional resonance. At the same time there’s been a swell of concern over a backlash by consumers against global brands and their ubiquity. The qualitative study demonstrated that consumers do love brands and would consider a world without brands a dreary place. But they dislike the homogeneity of global brands and the ‘meaning gap’ between the things a brand promises and the experience it actually delivers.

According to the research, customer-brand relationships take four basic forms. Each fulfils a different need. The first three – brand as security, social affiliation, or as a means of expression and identity – are based on rational motives or social behaviour. There is a fourth type of consumer-brand relation in which the brand fulfils the consumer’s need for an intense experience.

In this case the brand-consumer relationship is based on an



intensified experience at the moment or moments of use, amplified by brand communications and by the personal meaning a consumer brings to the brand.

Experience mode connections are what consumers in the US, Australia, Japan and Northern Europe are increasingly looking for. At their heart is often a feeling of personal transformation – “When I’ve had a bad day I go to FNAC. When I leave I’m in a good mood again” as one respondent in France said. Other consumers talked about feeling “like a jewel”, “powerful”, or “more balanced” among many other positive, transformative sensations.

What does this mean for branding and marketing?

Personal

To solve these problems marketing needs to be more personal, but personalising branding and communications is difficult. Experience mode connections offer a solution – it’s not the branding that is personal in such a relationship, but the experience. By making the experience the hero of a brand’s story, the meaning gap can be closed and even a mass market brand can feel unique to a user.

For instance, a Hungarian speaks about what Old Spice provides him, “If you want to lead a successful and balanced life, it is essential to make peace with yourself first. It is Old Spice that gives me this balance. It helps me get my act together in the morning.”

The study identifies four key means by which brand owners can create an intense brand experience: differentiation, consistency, caring and storytelling.

In many key markets – most of Asia, Africa and Latin America – experience mode relationships are still rare, and branding is still based on ideas of trustworthiness or social affiliation. Even where experience mode relationships are more important, they are difficult to build. The most important thing is to make sure the experience you are offering is actually different, whether in terms of design, sensory excellence or technical innovation. The experience has to be consistent, and the brand’s communications need to be built around it, making the experience part of a longer and wider story – think of the way the iPod is marketed as a device that will change the way you consume music, for instance. Finally, an experience mode relationship is built on the idea that the brand cares for the consumer in some personal way.

None of this is easy to do, but the benefits are clear. The type of consumer who forms these connections is most often an adult with no family responsibilities, or a senior, and the experience mode offers a roadmap to reaching this demographic. And the countries in which experience mode relationships are strongest are also those with an ageing population: this trend is only going to become more noticeable in the next 20 years. [y](#)

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