

Book reviews

Brand Portfolio Strategy

David A. Aaker

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At first glance, Aaker's book appears to have limited application, being of interest only to very large, multi-brand marketers such as Procter & Gamble or Kraft/General Foods. There is a complex diagram in both the inside front and inside back covers which shows the components and terms of Aaker's brand portfolio strategy, a very few of which are master brands, endorser brands, sub-brands, strategic brands, and branded energizers. It would appear from scanning six whole diagrammatic boxes of such terminology that a firm has to have so many brands in the stable that each of the roles can be assigned to one or more of those brands. Not so. In examples defining and discussing each item in all six diagrammatic boxes, the author shows that there may be supportive roles for as few as one or two brands which trail in importance one's "major" brand.

For example: let's look at Aaker's discussion of endorser brands and driver roles. An endorser might be a brand or entity outside the company's own brands (e.g. a movie company "endorsing" a brand through product placement), or the endorser could be the corporation sanctioning a brand within it (e.g. Toyota endorsing its Corolla brand by calling it the "Toyota Corolla"). In this case, however, the name "Toyota" also becomes the driver of the Corolla brand, since most owners would say they drive a Toyota, not necessarily a Corolla.

Aaker begins his book with an explanation of brand portfolio strategy, which importantly ends with the brand portfolio objectives: synergy, leverage, relevance, strong brands, and clarity of image. In chapter 2, he puts the myriad elements into what he calls a "relationship spectrum," wherein lies most of the important definitions a reader will need in the remainder of the

book, and he follows it with a rather heavy chapter on "inputs to brand portfolio decisions." Then we are off to the races!

In part 2, the dynamics begin to appear: brand relevance (chapter 3), energizing and differentiating the brand (chapter 4), and accessing strategic assets (chapter 5). Chapter 5 is the most vital portion of the book, wherein Aaker shows us, through use of the Eddie Bauer Ford Explorer introduction, how "co-master brands" (in this case Eddie Bauer sporting goods and Ford's Explorer) can be combined to enhance the Explorer brand. It is also through this analysis that Aaker teaches us how to use external brands as differentiators and/or as energizers. Brand management executives should focus on this chapter, in my opinion.

Part 3 is a wide-ranging discussion of leveraging brand assets – what you can do with the brand itself, in addition to the outside forces you can bring to bear on it, as was the stuff of part 2. In the two chapters in part 3, Aaker discusses leveraging the brand into new markets ("will the brand enhance the extension? Will the extension enhance the brand?"), and he puts the extension risks into perspective. He uses Dove (Unilever calls it a "beauty bar" but to most of us its just plain "soap") as the illustrative brand saga, journaling its step-by-step brand extension: its failure as a dishwashing liquid, since its "cleansing cream" benefit implies unclean dishes; its being blindsided by P&G's Olay body wash, when Dove should have owned the moisturizer body wash position; its rejuvenation as a body wash with added nutrients; and, finally, the salutary effect of that product on the tired, old bar soap itself. The saga continues with explanations of Dove branded successes and failures in the deodorant and hair care product lines.

In an additional chapter in part 3, he uses GE Appliances and the Marriott experience to illustrate vertical brand extension – moving the brand up- or down-market with the introduction of flanker concepts (GE's "Monogram," "Profile," and "Hotpoint" range of brand names – sorry, no pun intended!) and Marriott's array from Ritz Carlton to Fairfield Inn.

Part 4 ties it all together, especially a relatively short but pithy chapter 10 (chapter 9 is devoted to leveraging the corporate brand, and while it is interesting and valuable, most brand management concentrates on individual

brands within the corporation, in my experience). In chapter 10, Aaker goes back to Ford and Unilever (as well as to BMW) to discuss focus and clarity – two major brand portfolio strategic objectives. The Ford/BMW comparison provides perhaps the clearest illustration of focus (again, no pun intended!):

Ford is a brand that has real strength in terms of quality and innovation credibility but may lack distinctiveness and personality, at least in some segments. Thus, it is unlikely that the Ford line of vehicles would be as strong without subbrands In contrast, the BMW brand follows a rather classic branded house strategy, with the master brand supported by a set of descriptor brands (300 series, 500 series, 700 series, M series, X5 SUV, Z4 convertible – parentheses mine) (p. 292).

This is a complex book, with a great deal for the reader to assimilate. Aaker's extensive use of real brand examples makes the going much easier and the retention greater. He has done an excellent job of setting out a wide range of actions management can take to capitalize on brand strengths. In this light, chapter 7 ("Leveraging the brand into new product-markets") is alone worth the price of the book. This wisdom will be useful to any brand manager, but in my opinion, it should be required reading for all marketing managers senior to the individual brand manager. This is top-level stuff, too important to entrust only to a brand manager whose days are made up of worrying about commercial wearout or the next packaging change.

Dan Chamberlin

Professor of Marketing, Regent University Graduate School of Business

Branded Customer Service: The New Competitive Edge

Janelle Barlow and Paul Stewart

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For marketing scholars and practitioners, the concept of branding remains echoed within university lecture halls, conference meeting spaces, and corporate boardrooms. No more are brands just names, logos, or taglines; they are values, beliefs, and

promises that customers expect to experience during a purchase. The authors assert that, although assessing this eminent cog (i.e. branding) to business success is not novel; a more thorough discussion on the impact of delivering brand promises through service interactions is needed.

Through media, promises about brand offerings are presented. When customers experience diminutive service relative to what was promised, their value perceptions of the brand erodes. To help evade such drastic consequences, marketers should attempt to make an emotional connection with their customers. This can be achieved through genuine brand customer service, which characterizes service that meets brand standards offered by media promises.

Janelle Barlow and Paul Stewart's *Branded Customer Service: The New Competitive Edge* offers an entertaining and convincing framework that service marketers can use to build their brands internally, leading to maximized stakeholder wealth. Using generic customer service (e.g. thanking customers as they leave an establishment) as a strategy to gain a competitive advantage is ill-advised. Rather, as the authors persuasively hypothesize, branded customer service (e.g. sending personalized thank you notes to customers' homes after they leave an establishment) is essential to profitably compete in today's marketplace. Comprised of three parts, the authors' book offers an intriguing look at branding in customer service contexts, benefiting both marketing scholars and practitioners.

Part I: "Linking the big world of branding to customer service" describes the evolution of service branding from a one-way communication tool to an emotional interactive experience. In today's competitive milieu, a brand must stand for something the customer will experience during a purchase; something that cannot be experienced elsewhere. The authors provide a plethora of examples epitomizing this notion. For example, at Southwest Airlines, customers will experience fun and love, which arguably is not offered at rival airlines. The authors advocate and support that notion that when firms are on-brand (i.e. they consistently deliver on what is promised through media), measures of success are augmented (e.g. customer and employee loyalty, stock price, and profit margins).

This section further argues that because customer service is integral to business success, human behavior trumps all other stimuli in regard to brand reinforcement. The reason, as the authors ardently note, is that loyalty is not generated by customer satisfaction alone. Rather, firms must get to know their customers personally (i.e. by name, not by number). In this sense, patrons must be treated as people, not as revenue-generating customers. To help accomplish this feat, scripting is argued against since it does not result in favorable emotional interactions. When genuine on-brand customer service is delivered, positive customer emotions are evoked and directed at service relations.

Effective training is a pre-requisite to deliver on-brand customer service. Barlow and Stewart fittingly suggest that developing a brand is analogous to developing the character of a person; it takes time, effort, and energy. Managers must be keenly perseverant to induce employees to continuously represent the brand's promise. One mistake can be detrimental to brand image. Aptly put:

Organizations spend millions to tell the world how they would like consumers to think about their brand offerings, and then a human being with three simple words can shatter the illusion (p. 41).

Part II: "Embedding on-brand service into your organizational DNA" accentuates the importance of aligning employee behavior with brand promises. Only when employees connect with the brand they represent will on-brand customer service be delivered. Eloquently put:

If the brand has strength and excitement, it gives staff a sense of identity, a feeling of belonging, and makes them feel positive about going to work. It also provides a clear sense of common purpose, a strong customer focus, and an orientation toward the future (p. 109).

In this sense, a firm's brand DNA (i.e. vision, mission, promise, values, position, and personality) must be absorbed and believed by employees, which facilitates a route toward consistent on-brand performance.

Crucial in providing on-brand customer service, Barlow and Stewart make a case for an integrated cultural shift where all stakeholders strive to make the brand's promise a reality. Human resources and brand champions are eminent to the transition process. The human resource department must act as gatekeepers, eradicating prospective employees who do not

embody the brand's promise. Through effective hiring, salient brand leaders, in the form of brand champions will emerge. These individuals live the brand, support and advance the vision, and help generate and maintain synergies, leading to effective and efficient cultural acceptance of the brand's promise.

Part III: "The branded customer service toolbox" provides strategies and exercises that a firm can use to align its employees' behaviors with its brand's promise. For on-brand customer service to occur, service employees must understand and believe their brand's pledge. Accordingly then, brands must be sold to and accepted by employees before they can be depicted effectively (i.e. on-brand) to customers. The strategies and exercises presented are not meant for use by every firm and for every occasion; rather these tactics and tasks should be applied with prudence.

To help impart on-brand positive emotional interactions with customers, the authors argue for stakeholder brand awareness. Such discernment can be acquired through brand knowledge (what is the brand about), brand specificity (what makes the brand unique), brand assessment (whether on-brand or off-brand customer service is delivered), and brand delivery (what the brand represents in action). Through this lore, being able to provide consistent on-brand customer service is possible; and:

Delivering a consistent feeling creates a platform where previous positive emotions can be re-experienced (p. 187).

To compete in today's customer service marketplace, branding should be viewed as more than a term; it must be deemed as a corporate way of life, lived through by service interactions. Building on this notion, Janelle Barlow and Paul Stewart have endeavored to make service marketers keen on strategies that will generate value to stakeholders. Fruitful avenues to pursue for both practitioners and researchers are offered in *Branded Customer Service: The New Competitive Edge*. Supported by corporate examples and empirical research, the ideas offered by Barlow and Stewart are validated, giving reason for this tome to occupy marketers' bookshelf space.

Jeremy J. Sierra

Assistant Professor, Northern Arizona University