Strategic Brand Management on the Cutting Edge: Building, Leveraging, Identifying, and Protecting Brands

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Introduction

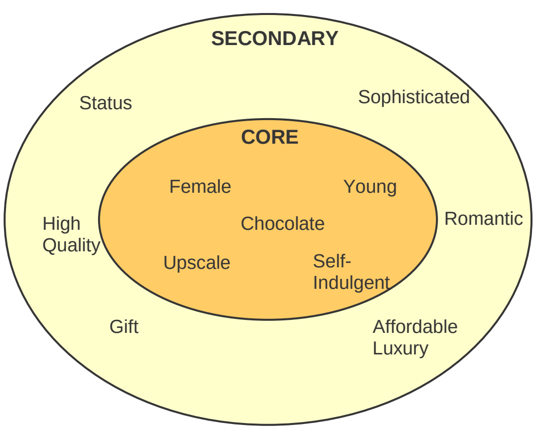
The BLIP model is a new framework for understanding, managing, and organizing the full scope of brand management tasks. It emphasizes the need to consider not just how to build and advertise brands, but how best to leverage them, how to identify the positions that they hold, and how to protect past brand investments.

In the area of strategic brand management, there is a tendency to over-concentrate on the important issue of brand building. While brand building is indeed important, focusing on it alone risks neglecting the other critical elements of strategic brand management. One way to help combat this myopic focus is to utilize an overarching framework that highlights the need for continued management of brands well beyond their initial creation. This is what the BLIP model hopes to achieve. It identifies four components of branding:

- Building
- Leveraging
- Identifying
- Protecting Brands

Building Brands

As a first step, marketers should define what they want their brand to represent (brand identity). A brand identity can be pictured in the form of a map with concentric circles, with the core defining elements of the brand in the center and secondary elements of the brand in an outer circle. Once marketers have a clear idea of the brand's identity, they can use marketing tools to build the brand. Using a 4 P's framework (product, price, place, promotion), marketers can create a promotional strategy that utilizes both traditional advertising and inventive approaches. The product itself should, through customers' experiences with it, build and solidify desired perceptions. The distribution system and placement should be managed by considering the customer experience and merchandising at every selling point. Finally, pricing should be both low enough to drive growth, but not so low as to dilute the brand.



Leveraging Brands
Marketers want to achieve a return on their investment, and one vital decision is how to best utilize their brand assets. Marketers may choose to leverage some of the brand's established equity to create line extensions, brand extensions, or co-branded products.

Line Extensions: Adding a new form of the product or service is generally regarded as the easiest extension, but is likely to generate low incremental revenue. Critical questions to be answered when considering a line extension include: From what brands do we want to launch extensions of existing product lines or services? How do we launch line extensions successfully?

Brand Extensions: This type of extension differs from a line extension in that it consists of extending the products or services brand into a *new category*. A brand extension has the benefit of real growth opportunity, but a drawback is the potential for costly mistakes. A critical question is: How do we select brand extensions to be successful?

Co-branded Products: This method of leveraging brands consists of an alliance of complementary brands. This can often take the form of ingredient branding. A good marketing strategy will consider whether co-branding is appropriate for particular situations.

Identifying and Measuring Brands
The question of identifying brands considers: What does the brand mean to customers? What product associations do customers have and what are their attitudes toward the brand? A marketer should also consider the non-product associations that accompany the brand. For example: What colors are associated with the brand? What is the brand's personality and what are the perceptions of the brand's country of origin? Monitoring customer's impressions of all these important elements of the brand plays an important role in brand management. It is important to identify what a brand is and how it changes over time so it can be successfully leveraged.

Measuring brand equity is an important component of strategic brand management. There are qualitative and quantitative research methods that can be used to understand the brand's meaning and value to consumers. Qualitative techniques include brand collages, which allow us to understand how consumers see the brand using pictures and words. Quantitative techniques include financial asset value calculations, such as those produced by InterBrand. Also popular are calculations of the customer's willingness to pay, which answers the question: How much more are customers willing to pay for your brand?

Protecting the Brand
This area of strategic brand management has historically been short-changed, being forgotten as the brand building bandwagon took off. However, it is now taking its rightful place as a key element of strategic brand management. Traditionally, protection came from legal teams whose work with trademarks remains an element of protecting the brand but is, by no means, the entire

protection needed. Marketers today should institute policies to avoid the dilution of brands. Many of the elements of leveraging a brand can also dilute a brand. Marketers should ask themselves: Are we monitoring and minimizing the costs of dilution from our line extensions, brand extensions, and co-branding arrangements? Are we saying “no” to those extensions that dilute more than they benefit? It is a useful lesson to consider not only which actions to take but also, just as importantly, which actions not to take.

Conclusion

Strategic brand management is not only a question of building brands, but also using a broader consideration framework when managing established brands. Marketers should consider the BLIP model when managing their brands. To maintain healthy and vital brands, firms need to pay attention to brand building, but should not neglect important issues related to brand leveraging, identification, and protection.

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