

A healthy brand is a healthy business

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Brands are not inanimate products we pick off the shelf. Like man, they are living entities with extendable organic identities that exist in the hearts and minds of everyone they touch. They evolve like embryonic creatures and grow to take on human personalities that make them powerful forces that control our desires.

Brands can move from the factories to the end-users. They are sensitive to market equilibrium, feed on market trends and grow through line or brand extensions whilst exhibiting a definite growth curve through their product lifecycle. Like humans, they breathe and thrive on the air of consumer emotion as an exhalation of core values and attributes. As animals compete for food and territory, so do brands compete for customers and markets. It's no tautology that brands demonstrate significant human traits that make it valid to conclude that they can die like every living being.

This reality of "brand death" calls for an intellectual discourse on how Nigerian brands can secure immortality in the shifting marketplace and survive the tsunami of death-causing market viruses. The Nigerian brand landscape has experienced more brand demise in this decade than the previous. We have seen more brand obituaries than excellent brand health. It's all a rhetoric of case studies on the rise and fall of our beloved brands at forum where brands are discussed.

Those that were inoculated from the virus of counterfeiting could not dodge the hit of the distribution snipers or evade the big stick of regulators. It's like a serial killer has been on a rampage and has left more brands in atrophy and morbidity.

The genuine concern this throws up in the mind of an average brand student is the question of who monitors our brands' state of health. Are there no observable symptoms that can mitigate against this avalanche of marketing disaster? It seems like our healthcare system, there is a dearth of pre-emptive brand diagnosis. The market is in dire need of anticipatory observers who like modern day doctors believe and live the mantra, 'prevention is better than cure.'

The biggest epidemic in our market is the preponderance of quick-fix and short-cut tactics of quacks masquerading as brand health custodians. They have got all the buzz words, the razzmatazz and the gizmos of health-boosting treatments without a deep-seated microscopic check-up at the DNA level. It's painful to realise that most of our brand health custodians have survived on a meagre credential of a five-day crash course in South Africa. It's no wonder each brand surgery leaves the brand worse for it. They have operated on brands for the sake of short-term profits, and have reduced their life expectancy through paucity of know-how.

Like a "one-drug-cures-all" peddler, every brand problem seems to be resolved using theme advertising. It is unimaginable how a fundamental product problem can be resolved with a new campaign or a distribution gap issue addressed with a value-destroying consumer promotion.

Most valuable asset

The immediate question that comes to the mind of a curious reader is “why another treatise on brand health?” Well, the answer is not far-fetched. It's a known fact that the brand is a business' most valuable asset. It's not the physical infrastructure or the size of the balance sheet. It's that special place a company has jealously secured in the minds of the consumers that subliminally propel preferential demand at every point of purchase. A healthy brand is the driving force behind a profitable customer relationship.

It's the admirable soul of a healthy brand that gives the right meaning to all the outward qualities expressed through tangible assets like the company name, the product, tag lines, symbolism, iconography and even jingles. When you go to the market with a healthy brand, you are not just a commodity but a strong emotional link that consumers are fanatically attached to. Healthy brands are truly the foundation of wealthy businesses.

Need for intelligent probing

From Milward Brown's Brand Dynamic Pyramid to Ipsos BrandOptimizer are hundreds of proprietary tools used as symptomatic frameworks for measuring brand health globally. There are even company-specific tools like Heineken's Dashboard custom-made for this same purpose.

Each comes with its peculiar strength and biases. For example, Nielsen's framework appreciates the importance of the category where a brand plays. It emphasises a need to deconstruct the category to be able to have a relative brand health score. This is premised on an assumption that a brand is as healthy as the category where it shares appreciable membership and mental cues.

With so many school of thoughts, agreeing on appropriate measures of brand health can be a very demanding exercise. Like a modern doctor, it is not just the blood pressure but an interpolatory combination with the blood sugar level and body mass index to make a valid conclusion. Woe to that brand custodian who like my great grandmother relies on body warmth to conclude if it's a typhoid fever. Its therefore pertinent every brand owner must understand the basic underlying principle of brand health measurement before your brand doctor walks in with his “prescriptions”.

Like Jim Lenskold said in his popular book *Marketing ROI*, “The roadblocks and endless detours on the path to effective brand health measures are not the result of subtle errors in the execution of sophisticated techniques, but are mostly the result of not getting the fundamentals right.”

Here are 5 key basic requirements

1. A cross matrix of behavioural and perceptual measures beyond market share scores.
2. Basic appreciation of how consumer perceptions drive positive brand behaviours.
3. Elementary extrapolation of future propensity from current perceptions.
4. An understanding of product vulnerability dimension, measured by how much the brand delivers on its primary reason for being purchased.
5. You must always consider a two-way approach that matches research feedback with “real-time” consumer buying behaviour.

Please note that a misleading measurement tends to correlate with the employment of ultra-sophisticated black-box techniques, managed by the gurus. The principle is to measure for the pleasure of discovering the treasure. As with any process, the practice of measurement is a journey more than a destination. It is also important we appreciate that there is no silver bullet. Each firm requires unique measures but always consider an appropriate mix of perceptual, financial and behavioural measures.

Beware of cosmetic surgeries - new logo, new pay-off

The brand guru Kevin Keller said, “Brands are built over years; it's beyond a yearly change of face.” So much as it's important to reinvigorate our brands to be relevant to times, we must not be sucked into the “my new logo” syndrome. It's a serious disaster to change your logo without translating it to a better experience, intuitive products, superior wow service, and smarter channels for the consumers. It is not merely in the exciting TV adverts with lovely models and sing-along songs. A genuine sincerity to the cause of brand health is beyond the sensational. Every act must cumulatively support a coherent point of view reinforced by every element of your marketing mix. This is really the most recommended treatment path in the Nigerian brand emergency wards. It's no jibe to mention that a popular branding consultant from South Africa had to rebrand itself having secured the best share of the “owambe” Nigerian rebranding spree.

The first symptom comes from your staff

Your brand message is as powerful as your brand messenger i.e. staff who deliver the experience. The first touchpoint for brand health check-up is to test how your staff lives the brand at every point of engaging consumers. This could be through the walk-in ambience, call centre response, problem resolution via email etc.

Internal stakeholders must first believe before you can make a believer out of somebody else. It's “faithless” spending millions of Naira on high-impact advertising and brand communication programs, yet devote little or no resources to make sure people inside the company understand and “buy into” what the brand is all about.

It's simply practising what you preach.

Doctors from top management

Brand health tracking requires company-wide resources. Brand-health measures need to be elevated and added to the executive “dashboard” as leading indicators predicting future revenue streams. As such, they should be reviewed by the executive team with capital allocation mindset. Investing in brands is securing future profitability, and as such, brand building must be seen as a marathon and not a sprint. Surprisingly, few brands appear to be set up for the long haul.

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