



Not Just Different but Meaningfully Different

For many years, a smooth green stone has sat on my desk. It's a piece of serpentine that I was given when, as a small child, I visited an artist's workshop in Scotland. Truthfully, it's a pretty unremarkable rock, and I doubt that anyone else would find it interesting, but it means something to me.



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You may have some trinket or memento on your desk as well—something that doesn't have any practical purpose and appears insignificant to others, but is meaningful to you. Your unique history with the object makes it special.

I think the fact that we can form such attachments with relatively inconsequential objects illustrates a too-often-overlooked concept that is important for brands and brand marketing: the concept of meaningful difference. A presentation I saw recently, created by the agency BBH, also focuses on the concept of difference. The presentation proclaimed that the “classic” communications model, in which communication that is relevant, different, and motivating leads to behavioral change, has given way to the “insight” model, in which changes in behavior are effected by communication that is simply relevant and motivating.

“We have forgotten the power of difference,” BBH asserted. I am afraid that they are right—and that this amnesia applies to both communication and branding. Many marketers today value relevance to the exclusion of difference—and to the detriment of their brands.

Yet those who first demoted “difference” from its place of honor in communications may have done so for the right reasons. They may have realized that being different for the sake of being different was of little value. But the mistake they made was to throw out difference altogether and switch their emphasis to relevance. Successful brands are both relevant *and* different—but they are also more than that. Successful brands are *meaningfully* different.

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So what's a meaningful difference? I think of it this way. We humans find it impossible to judge anything in isolation. We tend to compare things to very close alternatives. So a *difference*, a *factor that distinguishes one item from another*, gets our attention. And while a difference may be apparent to most people, it won't seem important to everyone. A *meaningful* difference is one that is considered to be *important*—one that provides a brand with a meaning that is likely to have an *influence* on a person's brand choice.



Brand meaning can originate from a multitude of sources. It could come from your personal history with a brand; for example, you might use the same brand of detergent that your mother used. Or it could come from functional characteristics; you might really like the intuitive interface of that tablet computer. You might be attached to your car because you think it looks hot or because it is economical and saves you money. Or a brand's meaning for you might simply be that it is familiar when others are not. Meaning can be functional and tangible or emotional and intangible or all of the above. Meaning is in the eye of the beholder.

The Value of Meaningful Difference

Relevance *is* important. Millward Brown's BrandDynamics™ equity model shows that those who find a brand relevant—that is, who admit that the brand offers something they want or need at an acceptable price—are four times more likely to purchase it than those who don't. But because, on average, across a range of categories, people find as many as six brands to be relevant, they still need additional reasons to choose among them.

When people go beyond relevance to “bond” with a brand (“bonding” is the strongest degree of consumer affinity defined by BrandDynamics), they believe that the brand satisfies their needs better than others in the category. People who bond with a brand are over five times as likely to buy the brand as those who simply consider it relevant.

What drives people to bonding? Recent analysis suggests that “meaningful difference” is a critical factor. People who cite three key advantages of a brand—that it is different, that it is more appealing than others, and that they have a higher opinion of it—tend to have the highest predicted probability of purchase. In other words, they consider the brand to be different in a “good” or “meaningful” way. The same three attributes are an integral part of Voltage 2.0, a metric that has been proven to relate to both a brand's ability to command a price premium and the likelihood of future growth in market share.

How Can Something So Small Be So Important?

In my recent point of view [“It Is Not a Choice: Brands Should Seek Differentiation and Distinctiveness,”](#) I cited a statistic

from our BrandZ database about “difference.” I said, “Among those that consider a brand acceptable, an average of 18 percent agreed that it was different from others ... (Note: At this level, ‘different from others’ is one of the most discriminating attributes within our data set.)”

Several people have commented that an average of 18 percent does not seem very high. And it's unfortunately true that one of the heuristics by which we operate as humans is that big numbers seem more important than small ones. But actually, the fact that the majority of brands are not considered to be very different from each other makes “different” a very discriminating element. “Different” is not a generic, applies-to-every-brand-in-the-category attribute. It is not an insipid, I-want-everyone-to-buy-me attribute. Instead, it is a characteristic that sets the brand apart and gives it the ability to attract new buyers while commanding a price premium.

What Is a Meaningful Difference?

What really constitutes a meaningful difference, especially in developed markets where most brands are functionally equivalent? As I said earlier, a meaningful difference is one that is significant and influential. It might be a tangible product-oriented difference, or it might be an emotional and intangible difference. A difference that may seem trivial to some people may, for others, add that extra something that makes them choose that brand over others. A brand like





Coca-Cola is unlikely to change its formulation, particularly after the debacle of New Coke. Instead, Coke works single-mindedly to create intangible differentiation through creative campaigns that focus people's attention on the brand's reason for being. The "Open Happiness" advertising, "My Coke" Rewards, and the brand's engagement with social media all remind people of what Coke stands for. They layer

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new and renewed meaning onto a long-established and dominant brand. As a result of this communication, ardent fans continue to believe that there is simply no substitute for their favorite soft drink.

This points up the roles that "difference" and "relevance" play in determining people's conscious responses to advertising. Perceived relevance is a fundamental factor in determining whether or not people find an ad persuasive, but it is not the only one. When people say that an ad has made them more likely to buy a brand, they are also likely to say that the message was relevant, new, credible, and different. Newness—that is, new news—is important in changing people's minds about a brand, while credibility and difference boost an ad's motivational potential.

This said, it is critical to note that persuasion is just one route to sales success, and it tends to be a one-off event. Recent analysis conducted by my colleagues Dominic Twose and Polly Wyn Jones suggests that highly creative ads can have a more enduring effect than ads that are more persuasive but less engaging. Building on previous analysis that demonstrated the connection between sales effectiveness (both long- and short-term) and an ad's ability to generate brand-linked memorability (which we measure using the Awareness Index), Polly and Dominic studied ads that were recognized with IPA Awards for being highly creative. They observed that these highly creative ads, whether they were especially persuasive or not, scored high on the Awareness Index, and thus were likely to generate sales. So perhaps what is most important for long-term success is ensuring that a brand remains salient through creative and engaging advertising that reminds people what the brand stands for.

Small differences, even intangible ones, can have big effects in relatively undifferentiated categories. The Old Spice campaign, "The Man Your Man Could Smell Like," was different not only from previous Old Spice campaigns, but also from any other campaigns for male grooming products. In pushing the brand into new territory, the campaign risked being seen as inappropriate to the brand and category, but instead its tongue-in-cheek humor managed to engage a new young audience, thus reframing the brand and boosting its growth. But the Old Spice campaign didn't work by making people note the brand's "relevance" and immediately add the product to their shopping lists. Rather, it gave them a moment of amusement, which they probably forgot about almost immediately. But later, when they noticed the brand on the shelf, that amusement, whether consciously remembered or not, made the brand different—and for some people, that difference was enough to make them choose it.

Meaningful Difference Is Ongoing, Not One-off

An intangible difference rooted in advertising memories can be enough to get someone to try a brand. But to finish the job of winning over a new user, a brand has to deliver a rewarding experience. A positive experience will confirm



the user's belief in the brand's unique value, perhaps to the extent of supporting a higher-than-average price.

In this way, I believe that brands are like my lump of serpentine. They start out with a meaning that is fresh, new, and specific, based on when and how we first encounter them. Then, over time, familiarity and experience layer additional significance onto them. Some of that added significance may be quite tangential to what originally motivated our interest in the brand, but it's likely to be important to us nevertheless, just as the meaning that has accrued to my lump of serpentine over the years is important to me. So one of the most critical things a marketer can do is to continue to add meaning to a brand over time through events, sponsorships, and compelling communication. It is when a meaningful difference is conveyed and delivered in a way that resonates with consumers that attitudes and behaviors can be affected.

Meaning, Not Relevance, Is the Difference Maker

When we study today's most profitable and successful brands, the importance of meaningful difference becomes obvious. The world's strongest brands are not the ones that are most relevant. On the contrary, the most successful brands don't try to be all things to all people. Apple's shares of the computer and mobile phone markets are still relatively small, held in check by the price premium Apple commands. But Apple sits near the top of the BrandZ Top 100 Most Valuable Brands ranking. Burberry and Tiffany

have both delisted cheaper items that were attracting the "wrong" type of customer. And sometimes customers make their own choices. Not everyone wants to shop at Wal-Mart.

Relevance, on its own, is not a difference maker. It's necessary but not sufficient for brand success. Relevance alone won't motivate purchase, especially when brand switching is involved. Even when acting on impulse, people need to find something different and appealing in the brands they choose.

In some categories, like salty snacks, carbonated soft drinks, and confectionary, it may be enough for a brand to have a bank of positive advertising memories in people's minds. A pleasant and amusing association may be enough to prompt someone to say, "I like that one more than others." In other categories, like computers, insurance, and airlines, marketing communication will need to provide a more coherent story of why a brand is different and better, if only to reassure people that they are making a good choice.

In the absence of a meaningful difference, the cheapest brand may be regarded as the best choice. Lack of differentiation turns brands into commodities and marketing messages into white noise. But a meaningful difference can spark consumer interest and fuel demand for a brand, even when that brand carries a significant price premium. In today's complex, confusing, and increasingly impersonal world, people cherish meaning wherever they find it, whether it's in a brand, a memory, or a lump of rock. So to build value, give people a reason to cherish your brand.

To read more about brand differentiation, please visit www.mb-blog.com.

If you liked "Not Just Different, but Meaningfully Different," you might also be interested in:

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