

The Value of Community-Brands

using the example of the Apache Brand

Background

Consumers love their brands (Aaker 1997; Carroll and Ahuvia 2006) and so do companies. Since the emergence of brands in the business world in the second half of the nineteenth century, the story of brands has been a story of success. Brands provide benefits for both, producers and consumers. However what constitutes the value of brands and the role of brands in consumer's lives has changed several times throughout history. Over time, brands have developed from simple markers of identification to complex social phenomena (Mühlbacher et al. 2006). As a result, also the consumer-brand relationship became more complex and more intense. Similarly companies learned to love their brands as they realized that their brand names are among the most valuable assets they possess. Thus brand management, which used to be a supportive function, advanced to a core business function in many companies. Today, in our postmodern society brands play an important role in the lives of consumers and companies.

However brands also cause trouble (Holt 2002). Just as brands have caused excitement among consumers throughout history, notions of consumer resistance were also present (Hollenbeck 2005). According to Holt (2002), this recurring mismatch between the predominant branding concept and consumer's expectations is responsible for the ongoing advancement of brands and branding. From an evolutionary perspective on brands, brands fulfill a certain function depending on consumers needs and wishes. But as marketing deals with human beings, and their behavior is not only mutable but also unpredictable, the value brands provide can only be understood in relation to both, time and place. Thus the value brands provide is in a constant state of flux (Zinkham and Hirschheim 1992). And, in fact there is increasing evidence that our understanding of brands and branding is ripe for review. On the one hand, many well-recognized scholars believe that the predominant branding needs to catch up with reality (Holt 2002; Kozinets 2002; Pitt et al. 2006; Prahalad 2004; Solomon 2003), and on the other hand consumer's critique on brands and branding increases. First, research in anti-consumption and brand avoidance reveals that today reasons for consumers to avoid a certain brand can be just as complex as reasons to choose a brand (Cromie and Ewing 2009; Dalli et al. 2006; Lee

et al. 2009). So for instance, consumers avoid brands, because they do not want to be associated with negative symbolic meanings they perceive to be inherent to the brand. Another reason for brand avoidance refers to the corporate brand. Wherever there is power there is resistance, argues Foucault (1988), and in fact, as corporations have become increasingly powerful a similar development can be observed in regard of brands. Consumer resistance in the form of cynicism fosters the general distrust towards corporations and accuses them of their manipulative marketing strategies, their non existing social responsibility, and their profit-maximization strategies (Dalli et al. 2006; Lee et al. 2009). Besides unethical corporate behavior, local brands are often preferred to global brands because they are seen as not having completely lost the connection to their local community (Lee et al. 2009).

Second, advances in marketing theory has undergone several profound changes within the last decade. However, our understanding of brands and branding still seems to have been stuck in the late 80s. For instance the so called „service-dominant logic of marketing“ (Vargo and Lusch 2004) has found instant appeal among scholars, because as Ambler (2004) points out, „marketing, which initially adopted the customer’s perspective, ironically, has lost this focus“ (1). The s-d logic of marketing constitutes a shift away from the exchange of tangible goods towards the exchange of intangibles (Salzer-Mörling and Strannegård 2004; Vargo and Lusch 2004). The concept of customer orientation and the notion that customers do not want goods or services per se, but fulfillment are not new (Drucker 1954; Gummesson 1995; Levitt 1960). However the s-d logic calls for a more dramatic shift of thought by challenging the predominant view of how value is created (Vargo and Lusch 2004). The basic principle of the s-d logic of marketing is, that it is service, rather than goods, that form the basic unit of economic exchange (Vargo and Lusch 2004). Tangible goods hereby only represent a special case of service provision (Vargo and Lusch 2004), or „service appliances through which customers derive their value-in-use“ (Ballantyne and Varey 2008, 11). Instead of being seen as the physical distribution and the transfer of ownership of goods (Savitt 1990), marketing is seen as a „continuous series of social and economic processes that is largely focused on operant resources with which the firm is constantly striving to make better value propositions than its competitors“ (Vargo and Lusch 2004). This constitutes a shift from the make-and-sell view towards a sense-and-response view on marketing activity (Vargo and Lusch 2004).

Third, as stated above, the value and benefits brands provide can only be understood in relation to time and place. Since the second half of the 1990s some technological innovations, such as the mobile phone and the Internet, have altered the environment and

changed our lifestyles in such a dramatic way, that the function brands fulfill might become obsolete. For instance, brands are said to reduce search costs for consumers, but so does the use of IT. Search engines nowadays are able to browse billions of webpages in just a moment and order results in only a fraction of one second. A second function brands fulfill for consumers is the reduction of the risk of choosing the wrong brand, for instance due to quality issues. However it can be argued that the increased communication and information exchange possibilities created by IT also diminishes the benefits of this function (Berthon et al. 1999).

Taken together, two things can be pointed out. First, brands today are best described as complex social phenomena (Mühlbacher et al. 2006), and second, just as brands have become more important to and more central in consumers' lives, consumers demand more from brands. While this does not mean that the reassuring or reduction function of brands decreases in importance, it is not enough anymore to satisfy consumer's expectations. Rather, great brands will additionally provide meaning to consumer's lives, give them a sense of belonging and the possibility to connect with like-minded people. Furthermore outperforming brands will not only enable consumers to perform a specific task better or faster, but additionally educate the consumer and enable him to learn and develop, and thus support them in their life projects. Consumer more than once have demonstrated their desire to gain knowledge. Great brands will thus not hold back information or refuse consumer's interest in the brand, but rather create possibilities for consumers to connect, learn and get involved.

The Value of Community-Brands

From an evolutionary perspective it can be stated that the emergence and the persistence of community-created brands is a strong sign for their value adding function. As argued before, the community, and more specifically the way the community is organized (also referred to as „The Apache Way“), constitutes the basis of the value. First, it is the social capital which is inherent in these communities which accounts for a large part of the value of the brand. And second, it is the additional and unique benefits community brands provide, which make them valuable in the eye of the consumer.

The Social Capital of Community Brands

The concept of social capital stems from the study of neighborhoods, families, schools, governance, and other communities (Jackman and Miller 1998; Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993; Woolcock 1998). Although there is no common definition of the concept, and it has been argued that „it means many things to many people“ (Narayan and Pritchett 1997, 2), the concept of social capital emphasizes the importance of networks and relationships in communities (Jacobs 1965). Adler and Kwon (2002) see social capital as „the goodwill available to individuals or groups“ (23), and its sources in the social relationships between members. In terms of community brands it can be argued that the social capital inherent to the community, and more specifically the social relations between members, provides unique benefits for both, community members and non-community members. First, community brands constitute a valuable environment for learning and knowledge-building. Many community members turn to Apache, often during their time at university, to satisfy their desire for learning and gaining additional knowledge. Apache thus constitutes a platform for exchange of thoughts but also for the improvement of skills. Similarly information is seen as one of the main benefits of social capital (Adler and Kwon 2002; Coleman 1988). The value here lies in the expertise of the community, and in the willingness to support and help new members. It is the access to a broader source of information, but also the quality of the information which accounts for the value of community brands in this regard, and which allows members to acquire new skills and knowledge (Burt 1997; Podolny and Page 1998; Powell and Smith-Doerr 1994; Uzzi 1997). Many corporate brands on the other hand cannot satisfy their consumer's curiosity and desire for learning in the same way. As knowledge becomes a competitive

advantage, companies will face the challenge to find the right balance between sharing knowledge and information on the one hand, and diluting their competitive advantage on the other hand. However, users also benefit from the community's expertise. In the case of Apache the most obvious benefit is the free availability of a high quality software. Furthermore it is the support and the continuous improvements which distinguish Apache from many commercial software vendors.

Second, and to a certain extent a result from the first point, membership of the Apache community entails social status and reputation as membership is commonly associated with certain competencies and skills. Additionally membership needs to be earned and can only be granted through a majority vote among existing members. Apache community members are well recognized for their expertise within the IT area, and thus being a member of the Apache community can serve as a door-opener in job applications or simply make people listen to you. The value of community brands as reference and evidence for a certain skill set mainly derives from the way the community is organized and how new members are selected. In studies exploring social capital it has been pointed out, that especially in communities where membership is restricted, this effect occurs (Bourdieu 1986; Burt 1992; D'Aveni and Kesner 1993).

Additional and Unique Benefits of Community Brands

However the value of community brands is not only based on the social capital of the community. As postmodernity provides new challenges for brands and branding (Holt 2002), it is argued here, that community brands are better able to fulfill the postmodern consumer's demands than many commercial brands. First, as pointed out by Cova and Rémy (2007), in their study of the organic food market, there is an increasing desire among consumers to, not flee the market system per se, but to interact with the market in a new, less commercial way. Community brands represent such a place. They constitute a space not determined by efficiency, but instead they provide a platform where people can come together and simply do things for the sheer pleasure of doing them. Furthermore it's a place to try things out. And it is this freedom that is needed for true self-expression (Sherry et al. 2007). In fact, the words experiment and experience stem from the same Latin word „experiri“, which means test or trial (Sherry et al. 2007). Several community members emphasized, that during their day-job their passion for writing code is determined and undercut by constraints. Never being able to do things right, and always being under time- and cost-pressure is exactly what makes the difference

between being a programmer in a corporation and being a contributor to an Apache project. That is what community members value, because they became programmers for the pleasure of writing code and not for meeting deadlines. Although the results are more or less the same, namely high quality software, the approach is totally different.

Second, community brands represent more suitable signs for consumer's identity creation and life projects. Holt (2002) argues, that „in order to serve as valuable ingredients in producing the self, branded cultural resources must be perceived as authentic“ (Holt 2002, 83). In order to be perceived as authentic, a brand must be disinterested and not driven by an economic agenda (Holt 2002). By their very nature community brands are more authentic than traditional, commercial brands. Furthermore in the case of community brands, the community is the brand and thus there is no danger for the brand of being perceived as disconnected from the actions of the community (Holt 2002). And, although within the Apache community no significant anti-corporation or anti-capitalism attitude could have been identified, such an attitude might even further facilitate the preference of community brands over commercial brands in other cases. An increasing resentment regarding bad corporate behavior might even increase the popularity of community brands for community members but also for non-community members.

Third, it has been argued that consumers are not satisfied anymore with their passive and purely consumptive role (Arnould et al. 2006; Sherry et al. 2007). The days are over, where the consumer was at the end of the chain and a mere reactor to marketer's actions (Arnould et al. 2006; Hetzel 2007). Rather consumers want to add their own values and personalities. And in fact, this enhances the consumer's experience (Sherry et al. 2007). Recent research in consumer behavior comes to the conclusion that „where consumers are given large degrees of freedom to create or co-create with organizers, they feel it as authenticity, a type of soulfulness and meaning, and they respond with enthusiasm, energy, and action“ (Sherry et al. 2007, 30). Community brands provide not only co-creation possibilities but grant the consumer full control over the brand and the own experience. This does not only allow a more personalized and thus enhanced experience, but furthermore brand owner legitimacy struggles (Avery 2007; Kates 2004; Kirmani et al. 1999; Muniz and O'Guinn 2001) can be avoided as the community determines who will be associated with the brand and who won't. Besides there is no threat of undesired changes done to the brand's appearance by corporate brand managers (Hirschman 1970).

The Value of the Apache Brand

As stated above, the value of the Apache brand is, to a large part, based on the way the community works as well as on the social capital which lies at the heart of the community. This value is transformed into a variety of benefits for community members but also non-community members and partner companies.

For community members, the Apache brand creates an environment which allows them to live through a unique experience. A large part of the value derives from the experience the brands enables and facilitates:

„When I became a programmer, I started when I was 14 years old, I just wanted to write code. I still want to, this is why I am part of the Apache project. But you never have time to write some code you want to write. Because you do it for money, you have to feed your family. Apache offers you an opportunity to do something for free, you do not get money out of it, but fun, which is much more important. So you can express yourself as a programmer. And this is what makes things very interesting.“

„With Apache you do not have cost constraints and you do not have the time constraint. You just have the feature constraint. So you can focus on creating this feature and this is what you work on in Apache. Without having to take care of the time and the costs and the money. Its just pure fun, you are doing what you like to do.“

However the value of the Apache brand is not limited to ideological and self-expression value for community members. The brand also holds commercial value for community members as well as partners. For instance, as Apache is commonly associated with excellent programming skills. Thus for members, this association can prove beneficial, as the following two excerpts demonstrate:

„... they said: ‚You are just a contractor, we do not care what you say!‘ ... Then I sent an e-mail using my apache.org account and afterwards all the technical guys came to me and said: ‚Oh you

work for Apache. You said something yesterday?’ So it changes perception.“

„... there are stories, like people going to job interviews and mentioning that they are a community member... It makes the people listen, because it does carry some value.“

Besides for many people interested in programming, Apache serves as a valuable learning environment. The openness of the community and the willingness to share knowledge and help each other are believed to be key drivers of the attractiveness of Apache. As knowledge is increasingly seen as not only one, but the competitive advantage, many corporate brands cannot or are not willing to share their knowledge and be as open as Apache. However, for users this holds several advantages. Not only can they satisfy their curiosity and thirst for knowledge, but improved programming skills and experience can later be transformed into commercial value.

Furthermore there are various commercial benefits for partners and sponsors. The value from an increase in the click-through rate alone is higher than what many sponsors contribute financially. Thus being associated, and listed as a sponsor on the Apache webpage does constitute a commercial benefit for companies. Besides the reference to the Apache brand increases trust among consumers. While many consumers are still skeptical about OS software, the Apache brand strong enough to serve as a facilitator and generate trust among consumers. It is again the community standing behind the brand which creates these positive associations. Only through a strong and passionate community it can be ensured that projects will be further developed and that the current level of support can be adhered. The Apache brand here is not different from other strong brands.

Taken together the Apache brand provides a series of benefits to community members but also to non-community members. In many ways the Apache brand differs from traditional, commercial brands and thus is able to provide unique value. However, just like any other brand, the Apache brand needs to be managed properly in order to not only sustain the strength of the brand but to exploit its value of the brand. Thus the next chapter draws on existing branding literature and provides some guidelines for managing the brand.

The Management of the Apache Brand

Existing branding literature may prove as very valuable in regard of managing the Apache brand in a more professional manner. However, it would go beyond the scope of this paper to discuss every concept developed in regard of brand management. Therefore this paper focuses on two important and urgent issues, namely the selection of sponsors and partners in terms of brand fit and promotion through brand evangelists.

Selection of Sponsors and Partners

Apache is a well-recognized and strong brand within the IT area. This increases the attractiveness for other companies to enter in a cooperation. Although all cooperations might bring some financial benefits, Apache is well advised to select partners more carefully. As existing branding literature shows, brand alliance results in spillover effects. Although not necessarily effected equally, the perception and thus the value of both brands is effected. This can happen in a positive or negative way, depending on the existing attitude towards the brands and the perceived fit between the brands. Furthermore brand familiarity has a moderating effect and plays a key role in the evaluation of the brand alliance (Simonin and Ruth 1998). Thus Apache is well advised to pay more attention to the selection process of potential partners. Among others, the following questions might help to evaluate possible partner companies:

- How familiar is the partner brand to end-users and community members?
- What attitudes towards the partner brand exist?
- How well do the products fit together?
- How well do the brands fit together?
- Does the partnership/association with the partner brand contribute positively to what we want the Apache brand to stand for?

Furthermore through getting a deeper understanding of the value of the brand, Apache will be able to negotiate terms and financial contributions better. Thus further studies exploring the financial value of the Apache brand are expected to prove useful and put Apache in a better position when approached by potential partner companies.

Brand Evangelists

At the very basis of brand equity there lies brand awareness. If for instance a consumer is not aware of a certain brand, no positive associations and furthermore brand preference can occur. Thus companies spend billions in advertising to get in the head of consumers. However as traditional forms of advertising increasingly seem to lose their effectiveness, new forms arise. Nothing is said to be as powerful and valuable as word of mouth advertising from a person you trust. Many companies have to buy this form of advertising. Apache is in a unique position. For instance it does not have to pay others to create positive word-of-mouth, but instead can rely on a loyal and passionate group of community members. Thus Apache would be well advised to better exploit the passion of its community. This way not only brand awareness is increased, but furthermore positive associations are created, because the promotion is authentic and honest.

Conclusion

The success of brands and branding over the past 100 years is a strong sign for the value adding function and benefits of brands. However, seen from an evolutionary perspective, the value brands provide can only be understood in relation to both, time and place. Brands survive and are of value, because they fulfill a certain function in consumers lives. This value however is subject to change just as consumer behavior changes, and thus brands as well are forced to adapt and review their value adding function.

The postmodern consumer is different! Heavily facilitated through technology, most notably the Internet, the postmodern consumer is not a silent consumer at the end of the chain anymore. Rather he wants to be respected, heard and integrated in the value creation process. He is willing to invest time and money, but he expects authenticity and respect in exchange. As a response new concepts in marketing arise, which help us to better understand not only the new consumer but also the producer-consumer relationship. Similarly brands will not be remain unaffected. The benefits brands provided might not only decrease in importance or even become obsolete, but besides the consumer demands more from brands than a few decades ago.

The phenomenon of community-brands provides valuable insights into what consumers value and expect in regard of brands. It has been argued that brands will become an experience under the new service-dominant logic of marketing (Prahalad 2004) and indeed a lot of exciting opportunities arise from taking an experiential and community-centered view on brands and branding. Compared to traditional brands, community brands provide some unique and valuable benefits to consumers. The fact that there is a community, which constitutes the basis of every community brand, does not only distinguish it from many other, traditional brands but furthermore accounts for a large part of its value. There lies huge social capital in the social relations of community member which is transformed into benefits. Community brands enable their members to learn, develop, connect and actively co-create. Besides these communities of passion inspire people and in many cases give meaning to peoples lives. Benefits that many traditional, corporate brands are not willing or are not able to provide.

The Apache brand constitutes an impressive example of such a community brand. The Apache community not only managed to survive and grow, while many other open source communities faced troubles or even disappeared, but furthermore Apache has become a real institution and is well-known and respected within the IT area. As a community brand, Apache offers many of the benefits described above. Community members do not only respond with high loyalty towards the brand, but furthermore serve as passionate brand evangelists.

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