# Brand promises and a practitioner's unified theory of brand management

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## Abstract

*The simplest act is to make a promise. However, a promise is only good if it is kept. Many brand marketers have learned this lesson after the fact, after they have invested heavily in the important creative elements of communicating brand promises, without proper attention to the uncelebrated day-to-day activities that must take place to deliver consistently on the brand promises being made. This paper provides an experienced practitioner's view on how the various aspects of brand management can be brought together in a unified brand equation to help employees across an organisation understand the basic tenets of branding and their role in ensuring that promise delivery systems are in place to build, not dilute, brand equity*

## Keywords

*branding, brand promise, brand equation, employee, brand management, customer experience, corporate branding, brand equity*

## INTRODUCTION

To promise is a simple thing. To keep a promise, now there is the catch. All too often people make promises that they cannot keep, whether intentionally or unintentionally. Once one moves from a person-to-person promise level to a business-to-person promise level, the complexity and room for error and impact associated with keeping promises grows exponentially.

This story is no less important for being told before. On the contrary, it has often been forgotten or discounted as yesterday's brand buzz because it is an old maxim; yet the singular importance of a promise kept can never fall out of fashion as it is a core element of building trust and credibility individually and collectively as organisations.

As someone with 25 years of commercial experience, who currently serves as the global director of brand management for a major corporation, I often have the pleasure to discuss branding topics with internal teams from marketing and sales to manufacturing and science and technology. I also have many occasions to speak on the topic outside of my company. As a practitioner of brand management, I see first-hand how unifying a force a brand can be. I also see how quickly the concepts

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of brand management can be lost in translation as internal marketing teams, external consultants and agencies often turn to branding jargon to describe the brand management process. This often confuses the people who count most – the average employee – in delivering on the brand promise. This inspired the search for a simpler way to communicate the power of branding and to do so in a way that would resonate with employees across any organisation.

Two unlikely sources, physics and philosophy, helped to simplify and succinctly boil down the essence of branding for the average employee. Condensing brand management into a personal and actionable philosophy helps create a direct path between individuals and the brands they represent. Connecting others directly to the brand and their role in the process of building and defending it increases a firm's chances to create positive brand experiences and valuable brand equities.

## THE PHYSICIST

In my brand management role, I needed a way to quickly capture the essence of branding and communicate that essence without a lot of 'brandspeak'. There is such a wide divergence in understanding and appreciation for this multi-tentacled subject that something more was needed to help explain the many complex connections that have to take place for branding to be successful. It was in this search to simplify the complex that two physicists offered some valuable insights: Sir Isaac Newton and Albert Einstein.

Admittedly it is rare, if ever, that one points to the work of Newton or Einstein to help explain branding. Yet their ability to synthesise complex theory into elegant equations and communicate them to others is exactly what I needed to help translate brand management from theory into an action-oriented discipline.

While reviewing schoolwork with my son, I rediscovered Newton's second law of motion: [$F = ma$] or force is equal to mass times acceleration. Newton's law helped me understand more about celestial bodies and why my golf swing is awful. It also stretched my mind about organisations. When working in a small firm, the force required to move the organisation's mass onto a different path is fairly minor. When the mass or size of the organisation is large, it takes greater force to move it toward a common aim quickly. Sometimes this force is delivered by executive mandate, but it is altogether better when it is delivered by executive inspiration. Not only is the CEO the chief executive officer, he or she is also the chief emotional officer, setting the tone for how the organisation operates and how its brand vision is to be carried out across departments and deployed to the end market, be they customers, channel partners, employees, communities, shareholders or public officials.

Einstein's elegant equation, $E = mc^2$, states that mass and energy have an equivalence. They are two forms of the same thing: energy is liberated matter; matter is energy waiting to happen. As $c^2$ (the speed of light times itself) is a truly enormous number, what the equation is saying is that there is a huge amount of energy bound up in every material thing.[1] It is amazing that such a simple equation could help explain how the universe works. The equation also offered an insight about how the amount of energy within even the smallest mass is truly enormous. This got me thinking about the incomprehensible amounts of energy that reside within people individually and collectively as organisations. Through the work of Newton and Einstein, I discovered there was a possibility to unify the various aspects of brand management to help formalise and personalise branding for all employees – customer-facing and back-office alike.

## The brand equation and its place in brand management

I do not claim to be a Newton or an Einstein. Nor do I think my theories on brand management will change the way people view the universe. However, I do aspire to help simplify this topic to such a level that employees and management alike can grasp it enough to view their world within the context of branding and own it. While many branding academics have greater depth in brand theory, as a practitioner, I have found putting fundamental principles into the form of an equation quickly communicates the basic aspects of branding. Additionally, the interpretation of a basic equation can be customised for any audience based on their role within an organisation.

Put simply, Rozin's unified theory of brand management states that:

$$B = \Sigma(pk/pm)_t$$

with brands (B) equal to the summation ($\Sigma$) of promises kept (pk) divided by promises made (pm) over time (t) (Figure 1).

This equation may not explain how the cosmos works but, in my experience, it does help to explain the universe of the brand and the critical roles that promises play in creating customer loyalty. It also helps demonstrate how each employee has a vital role to play in an organisation's ability to create positive customer and other stakeholder experiences.

## THE PHILOSOPHER

Moving from the world of physics to one of philosophy reveals more practical ways

$$B = \sum (pk/pm)_t$$

**Figure 1** Rozin's unified theory of brand management to bring the equation to life. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a philosopher and author living in the 1700s, was one source of inspiration when he said: 'He who is most slow in making a promise is the most faithful in the performance of it'.

Being slow and deliberate in defining and articulating a brand promise is a vital first step in bringing the brand equation to life. Aligning an organisation's internal knowledge of what the brand promise is and what specific actions that employees, as individuals, must take to keep the promise is a critical next step to success for brand growth and competitive differentiation. Helping employees understand that the job they do is important and meaningful to delivering on the brand promise also goes a long way in creating high levels of employee engagement. When employees clearly understand what a company stands for and what its promises are, they can begin the hard work of delivering on them more consistently.

Executive management has to be front and centre in creating this understanding and clearly spelling out rewards and recognitions for 'on-brand' behaviours. Companies that talk openly about their brand and what it stands for have employees that not only intellectually understand the brand promise, but also have more emotional investment in supporting it through their individual contributions to the enterprise. With emotional commitment comes the ability of an organisation to tap employee discretionary efforts – the key differentiator for transforming a competitive brand into a truly exceptional one.

The real power source behind creating a clear articulation for the brand promise inside an organisation comes in the form of organisational teamwork and collaboration in service of a larger goal – keeping promises. This is particularly helpful to those departments that rarely interact directly with the end customers in the marketplace. When internal teams understand what the brand promise is, they can then define what it is they do that ultimately supports delivery of that promise to the end market. Often, this comes down to ensuring they are delivering on a subset of the promise to other internal teams who interact directly with the customer or other external stakeholders.

When individual departments take stock of the roles they play in support of the brand equation, they are in an improved position to align their people, processes and behaviours to support delivery of the promise across time and locations. A first step in this journey is to start with the relevant external stakeholder groups and backtrack their experiences with the firm across touch points and determine where an individual department intersects either directly with the external stakeholder or with other internal teams that support promise delivery to the external stakeholder. The next step is to prioritise how the department is performing on the most critical touch points, then setting a path forward to both reinforce positive steps already in place and plotting a path to improve those touch points that are not yet operationalised to support the brand promise to maximum effect.

Instituting a brand-based culture adds a lot of value to integrating brand promise thinking into a business model. As an example, 3M does this successfully through common brand-building steps. Two of these steps in particular are:

> (1) 'make sure the brand and its promise are consistent over time; (2) have a relevant and differentiated promise for each of the brands. If employees know what each brand stands for and why it is special and unique, then they are better able to understand what each brand is trying to accom-

plish and what role they play in bringing that promise to life'.[2]

Thinking about the brand equation within daily activities and in the context of performance against promises kept compared with promises made helps one to be more deliberate and 'faithful' in delivering against them.

## External branding

'Whether a company operates in a low-involvement industry or a high-involvement industry, customer interactions should be intentional, positive and focused on their needs and expectations.'[3] The business is a reflection of each employee's behaviour and performance of duty in service to its external stakeholders. The brand promise is rarely a single thing, but rather a collection and interpretation of various promises from the viewpoint of external stakeholders taken in the context of a specific touch point the stakeholder has with a company at a given time.

In business-to-business and in business-to-consumer branding alike, many promises are made and/or enabled by service staff within the brand equation. It is the service staff, whether they are the front line or enabling the front line that make the consistent fulfilment of promises possible. The global success of the Disney brand, for example, results from the company's insistence that employees recognise that they are always 'onstage' whenever in front of the customer, encouraging them to think of themselves as actors who have learned their roles and are contributing their best performance for the overall enjoyment of visitors.[4] The same can be said for leading technology and manufacturing firms whose employee base is committed to delivering high levels of quality, consistency and performance to differentiate their brand and to deliver exceptional experiences for their customers. Repeatedly boiling down the brand equation to the individual is the key to branding success, no matter the company, no matter the industry. Like Disney, employees of all firms could do well to consider that they are 'always on-stage'.

## Brand extension

Screening a business by brand promises helps to reveal where the brand has opportunities to expand or where it may be stretched too thin to deliver successfully. It also helps to uncover areas where the promise is oversold and may be dilutive to its ultimate equity. Promise evaluation screened by value propositions and ability to capture value help a firm determine proper brand architectural gaps and opportunities to tighten offerings under specific promise sets. It is very tempting for brand managers to extend a brand beyond its immediate ability to deliver on its promises, as the short-term rewards of doing so are often forthcoming. However, if the brand extension puts the overall brand promise in peril, the bill eventually comes due and the longer-term drag on brand equity costs many times more than the short-term profits that the extension may initially provide.

At the end of the day, companies must be selective about the business they want to conduct under a given brand promise and investigate additional brand directions that do not clearly meet the inferred terms and conditions of their existing brand promise set. Failing to do so properly is a common trap that can often deliver short-term gains at the risk of permanent dilution of the core brand promise and thereby a reduction in long-term value for the company.

### Branding through partners

As a business grows, the type of partnerships it enters into is another important consideration in managing the brand equation. The simplest example of this can be seen in terms of how a brand selects its channel and distribution partners. The phrase 'we are who we associate with' exemplifies the critical nature of partner selection. While it is tempting to expand a brand's coverage by quickly bringing on new channel partners, doing so without proper due diligence with regard to the partner's brand promise is often a long-term fatal flaw. Partnering with other businesses that share common aims in reputation, service, style and goals is additive in value in the brand equation and works to the advantage of all parties concerned – including external stakeholders. Conversely, expanding a brand's coverage through partners who do not share the same commitment to a common understanding of the brand promise is dilutive of the brand equation.

### Buying or divesting a brand

Measuring brand equity and placing a value on brand assets in various business systems is a complex task, to say the least, and worthy of the many articles devoted exclusively to the topic. However, for the purposes of this discussion on the brand equation, it is worth noting that the entire brand promise system deployed to build a brand must be taken into account to determine the likely future success of another firm's acquisition of a given brand. Jean-Noël Kapferer notes that: 'The brand can only be separated if, in spite of its alienation from the rest of the company, it remains unchanged. This is not always the case'.[5] As an example, he mentions that the promise of security-implied services offered under the IBM name cannot be disconnected from the company itself. Whereas at a product brand level, such as in the spirits industry, vodka being vodka, the real differentiation lies in the brand image, name and symbols and the separation of the brand from the parent company is made easier. The long-term successful transition, however, remains dependent on the acquiring company's ability to ensure that the quality, imagery and taste of the product remains consistent in the minds of the consumer.[5] In short, the acquiring company must be true to the promises made through imagery and associations of the previous owner or work to reposition the acquired brand with new ones backed by a new promise delivery system.

## CONCLUSION

Branding happens every day. Brand permeates everything that people do as individuals and collectively as organisations. Promises are constantly being made explicitly or by inference. Both activity and inactivity have the power to shape powerful perceptions of the brand and the stakeholder's experiences of them. So if perception impacts brand, and activity (or lack of it) creates perception, then it follows that it is in a company's best interest to proactively manage all of its activities and promises being made to create desired brand perceptions; and that this should be a priority of every company. This is of particular importance for business-to-business brands, where the branding experience often revolves around complex sales cycles and service arrangements involving deeper relationships and solution sets.

By linking all employee behaviours to brand promises and the systems needed to deliver on those promises via the brand equation, companies put themselves in prime position to build stronger relationships with their customers and develop stronger promoters for their brand. Promoters, being those contacts who have their lives enriched by their relationship with the brand and as a result make repeat purchases, offer a larger share of their spending and talk up the brand to their friends and colleagues.[6]

Finally, Ernest Hemingway, while not writing on branding, did have a powerful phrase about bull fighting that I submit is relevant in this context. He wrote of '*el momento de la verdad*' – the 'moment of truth'. Hemingway's 'moment of truth' was that instant when a matador has to strike, with his sword, the bull he has been fighting or be struck down by the bull himself. The collective 'moment of truth' is the time when stakeholders experience the brand. The summation of the individual and collective promises lies at the heart of the brand equation – promises kept versus promises made. The collective '*el momento de la verdad*' is when everyone and the employees of the organisations seize the moment to strike the metaphorical bull – not to kill it, but to serve it and create positive stakeholder experiences at each point of contact. By focusing attention on the simplicity of the brand equation, $B = \Sigma(pk/pm)_t$, one puts oneself in the moment of truth and realises what it is that individuals can do to deliver on the promises they make.

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