

Why brand identity is vital to success in the digital age

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MediaCom's Worldwide Chairman & CEO Stephen Allan explores the long-term benefit of brand identity in the digital age

Amazon founder Jeff Bezos once said: “your brand is what other people say about you when you’re not in the room.”

That is a huge challenge because no one can truly control opinion. Humans are unpredictable, increasingly easily distracted and sometimes very fickle. For example, research from [IBM](#) showed that 74% of consumers would buy from a retailer they’d never before purchased from, rather than a retailer they’d previously used if they were offered free shipping.

Those consumers are telling us that if another service were convenient enough, they would abandon a brand that they may well have used for years and built-up great trust in.

Simply put, loyalty and brand affinity are not easy to establish and they are even harder to maintain. However, it's not impossible. If a business can positively influence the way consumers see their brand and then deliver a service which meets that image and expectation, the public will respond.

The brand in a digital world

We live in a globalised, digital world where consumers interact, whether consciously or sub-consciously, with thousands of companies each day. This is a positive in that it opens up opportunities to engage and interact with audiences. But digital has also brought with it plenty of challenges.

The ability to reach consumers across numerous digital channels sounds like a dream, but there are some tech developments causing such disruption that brands are worried about their future. Voice, in particular, is as worrying for some businesses as it is exciting for others.

Amazon's Alexa is currently the world's leading voice search offering. It plays music, tells us the weather, updates diaries and alerts us to meetings. It also allows Amazon Prime customers to purchase items on Amazon by asking Alexa to do so. Unless the user specifically asks for a certain brand, Amazon's algorithms make that choice for them.

All of this means that a service, Amazon, has taken the retailer out of the loop entirely. And in a world where Amazon sells [its own products](#) – this is hugely concerning to the retail industry. How can they gain customer trust, affinity and loyalty when the consumer is simply saying “Alexa – order washing powder” without even looking at a branded item or its features?

Similarly, digital has opened markets up to new entrants, seen with the likes of Amazon's

move into insurance and the launch of numerous retail banks by non-financial services businesses. In the digital age, any brand can engage a huge audience if they have the right content and ultimately the right product or service.

In short, digital has changed the world and opened organisations up to more competition and that is a huge challenge when it comes to brand affinity.

The concept of the “brand” is not what it used to be

One previous source of comfort for brands was the knowledge that if you prove yourself over many years, consumers would feel more loyal to you.

You might assume that this is still the case. That the brands which consumers feel positively about will have been around for many decades and therefore have been able to build up trust and knowledge of the brand. In some countries, that’s pretty accurate. The [US top three most-loved](#) brands list include the likes of Hershey’s (founded 1894) and Pillsbury (founded 1869). Similarly, in the UK, there is a natural affinity for older brands, with the likes of the BBC, M&S and Boots appearing in most [favourite UK brands lists](#).

However, globally, this is not the case. The [five “most loved” brands in the world, as of 2017, are Facebook, Amazon, eBay, Apple and Snap](#). (Source: Netbase Brand Passion Report 2017: Top 100 Global Brand Love List)

This means that four of the top five “most loved” brands globally were founded in the last 24 years. All are also technology brands, though Facebook you could argue is media. This was a huge and detailed study of social media interaction and shows that what we may presume matters to consumers when it comes to affinity and loyalty often does not.

The power of brand identity

These businesses don’t fit the “old institution” mould. They exist in a transformative business environment– continually competing with each other, but also with the traditional businesses whose markets they have shaken up.

Yet somehow, these five companies have connected to their audience. How have they done it? A big part of their success is that they have developed hugely powerful brand identities.

When you see any of these brand names, you'll have an instant reaction... Amazon = fast, convenient service, Apple = innovation, Snap = fun social. Such images have been cultivated by smart businesses that fully understand the power of brand identity in the digital age.

From [Apple's 1984](#) to Amazon's "[Alexa loses her voice](#)" ad – this is powerful, consistent content which grabs attention and, vitally, sends a message and puts forward an image of that business.

Brand identity is increasingly important because, in a world where technology is streamlining brand interaction to the point of removing the brand entirely, a clear identity is the primary way a brand can differentiate itself.

The world's most loved brands are not resting, they are constantly re-affirming what they stand for, and what they aim for. They use comms to hammer home their brand identity – even if times are tougher and they need to re-establish their identity, [as Facebook has done recently](#).

Through advertising, marketing, PR and all other comms functions, brands can put forward information about the business that allows the public to see what it truly stands for, cares about and what its purpose is.

However, comms functions can be easy to dismiss – especially with budgets getting tighter and procurement looking to make efficiencies. Comms is often seen as less important to ensuring success than other business functions. But that view is misguided because for most brands, how well you connect with the consumer is going to define your success.

Brand identity is absolutely the answer and to achieve it, organisations must take the long-term view. Absolutely be efficient about your advertising and comms, but don't dismiss how vital it is going to be.

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