

What Is A Brand After All?

“The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.”
– The basic principle of Gestalt Psychology



The word “brand” was used on the frontier when ranchers burned their mark into the sides of their cattle. The mark helped them to discourage rustling on the open range and helped them separate their cattle from the others at the railhead and at market. This history is the origin of the mark, brand or logo as it has come to be called. The origin of brand is so literal and concrete, so why is it so elusive and why is it so poorly understood? Why are there so many different perceptions of what it has come to mean over time and how it operates in the marketplace? The reason is that the products and services that are sold are concrete; they can be seen. Brand is abstract. Brand is conceptual. A brand cannot be seen — not literally seen, although its manifestations can be seen, especially if one knows where and how to look.

Properly understood and acted upon by marketers, brand is the most valuable management tool available to them for enriching their businesses. It is the cornerstone on which to build value that can be seen in the marketplace, in the store, on websites and on Wall Street.

In the modern era of product parity, cultivating the brand has the richest potential to help marketers gain an advantage over the competition. Marketers who recognize this potential can harvest great rewards. The challenge is that there are forces working against them. Most MBA programs miss out on the essence of what a brand really is at the deepest level in the minds and hearts of consumers. Therefore, we find that the essence of what a brand is all about is underemphasized in the marketing and research functions of most companies. The consequence is that most companies unnecessarily leave a great deal of money on the table as they go to market with their brands.

It took FedEx ten years to wake up and realize that their customers were telling them something significant when they said “Just FedEx it!” During this ten-year period of time, FedEx executives actively resisted changing the brand’s name. Eventually, they realized that the transformation of Federal Express into a verb by the everyday language of their customers gave them an opportunity, so in 1994 they officially adopted FedEx as the name of the brand that is recognized as the worldwide standard for fast, reliable service. In 2000 Federal Express Corporation capitulated fully to the consumer mindset and changed the corporate name to FedEx Corporation.

In 2015, FedEx became a forty-seven billion dollar company with more than 400,000 employees.¹ As one of the world’s most respected brands, FedEx also ranks amongst



the most trusted and admired employers. With a broad portfolio of integrated transportation, e-commerce and business supply chain solutions, the company “lives to deliver” focusing on its core business—the package delivery network it launched in 1973, that now spans six continents and more than 210 countries.



As an example of how the company is constantly working to understand its brand and nurture it, FedEx commissioned an in-depth study by the Stanford Research Institute (SRI) on the concept of Access.² In the marketplace of ideas, Access is a very big idea. Ponder its opposite. Consider not having Access to the things that most business people now take for granted: a good education, clean water, health care, a computer, a telephone, reliable transportation, the Internet, etc. Access is a universal concept, critically important and profoundly applicable to every individual, business and nation. Without Access to the things that people need, they feel that they cannot and will not succeed. But when the reverse is true, all sorts of possibilities emerge; hope flourishes and lives are transformed. To quote FedEx Chairman Fred Smith: “At FedEx what we provide for our customers is something greater than logistics or transport. Ultimately, what we provide is Access.”

The SRI Access study has been publicized and it is capturing the attention and imagination of business, social and political thought leaders from both emerging and developed nations. It is helping the leaders of these nations see a direct link between Access to essential services and a country’s annual Gross Domestic Product (GDP). By helping a nation identify the components of superior Access, leaders can work toward developing the infrastructure needed to improve Access for all of their citizens, including businesses and consumers. And FedEx stands ready to facilitate the process.

While UPS, DHL, Deutsche Poste and other competitors may claim that they too provide Access, they are actually playing catch-up to the leadership position FedEx has already staked out and claimed for itself. Meanwhile FedEx is elevating its position in the minds of customers, businesses and thought leaders worldwide as a clarion voice for why improving Access to a global economy is critical. After all, what good is a global economy, if its citizens have little or no Access to it? According to Chairman Smith, “Access encourages new businesses, expands consumer choice, and increases our awareness of the greater world and the greater good.”

In this way FedEx has articulated its brand vision for all to see. As a result FedEx has the potential to emerge globally as the true market leader in the overnight package delivery industry — even in markets where it is not yet dominant.

So, what is a brand after all?

A brand is built upon the connection between the attributes of the product and the experience the consumer has buying and using the product. It is based on the difference between the literal product and what people are actually buying in terms of emotional benefits. The FedEx brand is not just the planes and trucks and employees. No matter how efficient and productive the equipment and people are, these things are just the price of being in business. FedEx is not just a company that delivers packages overnight no matter how well it delivers this service. All of these things are concrete and literal. They are all left-brain. These things are necessary for the FedEx brand to exist. But if you look at each piece individually, you will never understand what makes the FedEx brand resonate with people. These components are not enough for the brand to spring forth. The brand is greater than the sum of its parts. It is not tangible, but it is nonetheless real because it is meaningful emotionally to the consumer.

The essence of a brand is always understood by the answer to the question: “What business are you really in?” For example, FedEx is not merely in the business of providing overnight shipping services. The company is

really in the business of providing customers with reassurance and peace of mind. The emotional benefits a company / brand / product fulfills defines the business a company is really in. Those emotional benefits are what its brand is all about. Most companies do not have an answer to the question of what business they are really in. And that is why there is so much confusion over what a brand really is. The way to discover the answer is to delve into the mind of the consumer and understand at an emotional level what motivates people to buy.



When stumbling into an elusive concept like brand, it is helpful, in fact necessary, to understand what it is not. With that understanding firmly in place, a meaningful definition can be formulated.

Here are some of the things that a brand is not:

- Brand is not a logo
- Brand is not a name
- Brand is not a theme line
- Brand is not the advertising

These things may be part of a brand, but they are certainly not equivalent to the brand. They simply do not capture the heart of what a brand means to people, yet all four are confused with brand and melded into it every day.

There are many dimensions and concepts that are related to brand that marketers talk about. These dimensions overlap with one another. Different marketers mean different things by them and so there is no unanimity and much confusion. Some marketers even mistakenly equate one or more of them to brand.

Here are some of the dimensions that marketers talk about:

- Brand awareness
 - Unaided
 - Aided
- Brand image
- Brand attributes
- Brand equity
- Brand loyalty
- Brand identity
- Brand essence
- Brand character
- Brand position
- Brand value
- Brand touch points
- Brand steward
- Brand manager
- Brand management
- Brand extension



Two others come to mind — dimensions that have come into more common usage recently as more attention is being paid to brand. They are:

- Brand language
- Brand promise

The proliferation of language about brand indicates a lot of concern and interest in brand, but there are so many terms that the core of what a brand is all about gets lost all too often in the chatter — chatter which often becomes a cacophony of words and phrases without depth and understanding.



When brand is understood at its core, it becomes the primary engine for leveraging a business. Therefore, brand is not or should not be “owned” by marketing.

The best brands, the ones with the most value in the marketplace, are directed by the CEO, not by the marketing department.

Jack Welch is half right about the job of the CEO. As he defines it, the job of the CEO is to hire and develop the best possible people. But, he missed the other half of the job! It is to make sure that the people he hires nourish the company brands for which they are responsible. Group VPs and Directors cannot “subcontract” the responsibility to their marketing departments or to their ad agencies. When they do so, they do it at their own peril and the peril of the stockholders.

In order for executives and managers to see the potential for each of their businesses, a good definition of brand is essential. Many definitions of brand exist that focus on the literal aspects of brand. Therefore, we formulated our own definition that captures the true essence, power and potential of a brand. Our definition is as follows:

A brand is created as people make an emotional connection that transforms the literal product or service into an implicit promise that drives their perceptions, the way they feel, their behavior and their expectations.

The Gestalt psychologists taught that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. They meant that what people perceive is a function of both the actual visual images that they see and the expectations they impose on those images. A brand, then, is greater than the sum total of all of the product’s attributes.

The brand is that magical personality or essence that consumers grant to a product or service because of how it makes them feel.

The above definition of brand has the following elements that are not found in other definitions:

- A brand is created by people.
- A brand involves an emotional connection.
- People transform the product into an implicit promise.
- The implicit promise drives feelings, behavior and expectations.

The words in italics above are words that are not often found in MBA programs, in business textbooks or even in the popular business books that abound today. The reason that they are not in common usage in business is

that these words are mostly right brain words, referring to right brain processes that in general are poorly understood compared to the left brain processes with which most business people are more familiar. And it is no wonder that most people are more familiar with them, for that is what formal education in the USA and most of the developed world is almost entirely based on — left-brain skills and processes.



We address each of these elements and explain them, but first we want to single out a two-letter word in the definition — the word “as.” The word “as” appears in the beginning of the definition: “A brand is created as people make an emotional connection...” This word is carefully chosen to reflect the dynamic process that is at work in a product or service becoming a brand. It does not happen overnight. It is an evolution. It cannot be managed in the literal sense of that word, at least not for very long after the process begins. It can be nudged, cajoled, protected, nourished and fed, but it cannot be managed in the ordinary sense of the word, because the people who begin to make the transformation are customers, not company employees!

Have you ever seen curling during the Winter Olympics? The players do not manage or control the stone. They start it in the right direction at the right speed as best they can as they poke, nudge, urge, cajole and then sweep it with a broom toward the spot in the “house” where they want it to go. It is an almost perfect metaphor for how executives must construe their powers and their job of caring for their brands.



A brand can be directed, nudged and nourished, but the belief that it can be managed ignores that the most important people in the world take over almost immediately and become the driving force in the process. These people are consumers and customers! When executives realize how brands work and how they grow, they become servants of the people. Why?

First, consumers and customers last forever. Presumably, if the brand is any good at all, the people who use it will become lifetime proponents or even raving fans. And, their children will “inherit” their brands. They have more longevity than the stewards of the brand inside the company who will leave, be promoted or retire.

The second reason that executives and managers should see themselves as servants of the people is that consumers and customers begin to imbue the brand with characteristics and expectations not necessarily found in the company’s written strategy for the brand. This transformation demonstrates why we say a brand cannot literally be managed. Actually, a great brand can provide direction for the company that nurtures it. How can a brand direct you and your company rather than the other way around? The brand does it by communicating with you through brand language. Brand language comes from what your customers tell you about your brand.

Quite literally, customers will tell you what to do to nourish your brand, but only if you listen very carefully.

They will tell you how to grow the brand. While much can be done to manage a brand in the literal sense, brands can do the managing themselves when executives take their cues from the brand language used by customers. For this reason the company must include customers’ expectations for the brand in its strategic plans. If not, the customers will feel betrayed and the brand will languish.

Emotional Connection



The heart of a brand is wrapped up with how it makes people feel — how they feel while thinking about it, while dreaming about having it, while looking at it, while shopping for it, when taking it home for the first time, when experiencing it for the first time, while using it, while talking to other people about it, while other people are looking at it, etc. The feeling that they are seeking, usually without being consciously aware of what they are really looking for, is based on one or more of the many emotional needs we have identified through our research.

Everyone in marketing today is talking about the importance of nurturing an emotional connection with consumers. And everybody is right. But it is not so easy to find a marketer who will go beyond the overused term ‘emotional connection’ to understand how the connection is formed and what factors motivate people to connect to the brand and then to stay connected. To fully capitalize on the conventional wisdom about ‘emotional connection’, you have to discover the Emotional Needs that motivate consumers to become your customers and then to become your best customers. You also need to uncover the emotional barriers preventing consumers from trying and experiencing your brand, as well as the barriers blocking them from coming back again and again after that first trial.



There are hundreds of great examples of how the process works. Here are just a few examples of how people fulfill emotional needs through brands. There is the Need to Escape that is often fulfilled by adventurous activities at theme parks, often on hard iron rides. Then there is the Need for Community – a need fulfilled by a plethora of brands. Starbucks is one of them. Even Wal-Mart can meet this need although probably with a different segment of consumers. For these shoppers, just running into friends and neighbors makes them feel better.

Years ago Maybelline asked us to look at their annual survey results designed to track their brand against its primary competitors. We were surprised to a list of attributes that were almost entirely rational. After all, this is make-up. How much more emotional can a product category be? So, we conducted a Right Brain Research project designed to cover the landscape and go deep enough into the language women were using that we could recommend some powerful emotionally based attributes that they should be using to measure their brand’s performance and perceived quality against their competitors. We heard words and phrases about controlling her look, but we could not find any control-related words on the list of attributes they were measuring.

MAYBELLINE
NEW YORK



They also asked us to conduct two quantitative surveys, one based on their “tried and true” attributes, the rational ones they had been using for years; and another survey based on the new emotionally based attributes. The results were overwhelmingly in favor of the emotionally based list and were so exciting to the brand team that they invited their President and their Vice-President into the conference room to show them. They were equally excited, so much so, that from that day forward they abandoned their list of rational attributes forever. In our work helping Maybelline fulfill customers’ emotional needs, the brand skyrocketed to a 43% increase in their share of the mass market in decorative cosmetics.

Marketers can guess about the Psychological Dynamics that underpin the connection that their brands make with consumers. However, people naturally project their own needs and experiences when looking for answers

so they are not qualified to do so without bias. Fortunately, over time, we have developed time-tested methods of plumbing the depths of the minds of consumers and answering the riddle of why they buy and why they buy a specific brand. Our Right Brain Approach includes a methodology for guiding the discovery process, a comprehensive taxonomy of Emotional Needs and Emotional Barriers and a way for brand teams to translate the discoveries we make into powerful communication strategies.



Transformation

As a product or service evolves, its brand gradually becomes more than its concrete attributes. It becomes more than the sum of its parts. The “more” that the brand becomes is the extra value that is being created. The extra value is the heart of the brand and it is what makes it the most valuable thing to any business.

Consider Starbucks. Starbucks is a coffee shop! Or is it? Of course it is, at least on a superficial level, but it is much more than that, at a deeper level. It is much more than an enclosed shop where one can pick up a quick cup of coffee. It is a great brand. Just look at how the stock price has performed over the past 15 years.

Everyone would agree, but try to articulate what there is about Starbucks that makes it a great brand. Doing so is not easy. The words come to the lips, but they do not always make a lot of sense. It is a struggle.



Go ahead now. Pause in your reading for a moment. Try to describe it. Try to explain it. Write it down.

Starbucks is a special place. Ah, the glorious aroma when you step into a Starbucks! There is magic in the experience, or it would not be enduring. But, it is difficult to articulate what makes Starbucks magical. Starbucks is an oasis that offers renewal and reward for people who are plagued by the demands of life. It is a part of the community, and allows people to gather, share ideas, and forget about time and obligations. It gives people permission to take a break and relax. It also allows people to spend time alone, engrossed in reading or work, while still being a part of the larger world around them.

You can see that Starbucks is much more than a place to buy coffee. The essence of the brand is rich and complex. The founders of Starbucks created a great brand using tacit knowledge and intuitive understanding of consumers. For a business to truly understand its brand, this tacit knowledge and understanding needs to be put into words. Without articulating the essence of the brand in this way, it cannot be communicated and the secrets of the brand are held forever in the minds and hearts of a few tenured employees. Without articulation, their understanding cannot be communicated, and as the company grows, decisions are made further and further away from the core of what made the brand so great in the first place, and decline may set in.

Howard Schultz, the CEO who turned Starbucks into a global success, returned to the company in 2008 to help it reconnect emotionally with its customer base. He had only been gone for a couple of years, but the company began to slow down. Why? Because he failed to articulate the secrets of the brand, so that they could be communicated to his successors.

Implicit Promise



Once customers begin to transform the literal product or service into something more than the sum of its parts, the magical personality or essence that makes it “more” begins to spread through word of mouth. The “more” is that little something that cues them that the brand can help them to feel the way that they want to feel.

People begin to sense “the something more” on a tacit or implicit level. They intuit it or feel it, but do not overtly acknowledge it or articulate it.

They are not yet consciously aware of all of the benefits of the brand, even though they are responding to the benefits and are motivated by them.

During this stage of the development of a brand, the product is not a great brand yet, but it is on its way to becoming so. It is gathering adherents who will go out of their way and pay extra to experience the feeling that it offers them. The foundation is in place for building a great brand. Much work needs to be done, but the brand is now on its way!

For years, the FedEx tag line was “Absolutely, Positively!” This tag line also represented the promise of the brand, which is what made it so powerful and motivating. But, the company drifted away from the theme line as it changed advertising agencies. The extent to which the creative execution of advertising leaves this tag line behind, the more this company puts its brand integrity at risk. A basic rule for all businesses is as follows: Do not change your brand promise or theme line just because you change advertising agencies. And, never change it so much that it communicates a rational message or even a different emotionally based message, if the current one is resonating with people.

Expectations

As time goes on and people talk to one another about the brand, they begin to articulate some of the benefits they are feeling when they buy and use it. As they do, the implicit promise comes closer to expectations which are more explicit and more easily communicated. People start to look for certain things when they encounter the brand. Above all they expect to feel a certain way at any of its touch points. The expectations are all of the little things that people look for in the brand. They look for some of them consciously as though relying on a checklist (left brain), and they look for others intuitively, driven by how they feel (right brain). They cannot put it all into words now. Indeed, they may never be able to put all of it into words, but they will know for sure when the brand lets them down. They will know when it does not come through for them and when it betrays them. And, they will tell others about their disappointments.

Great brands just do a better job than their competitors of fulfilling people’s expectations and delivering the emotional benefits that motivate them to be in the category in the first place. They differentiate themselves and emerge from the rest of the pack by delivering the emotional benefits sought by the customer a little better than competitive brands.

This lesson is a difficult one for most marketers to grasp. They often ask us to find an attribute that they can own. Many times this is possible, but many times it is not a matter of owning an attribute, certainly

not a product related attribute. Often it is a matter of articulating a deep-seated emotional need first and then sticking to it, hammering it into the minds of consumers and delivering on the promise in the marketplace so that the competition cannot encroach on that space that the brand owns in the mind.



Often having a different (and deeper) understanding of what consumers really want and knowing how to give it to them is more important than having a different product or attribute that can be owned.

After all, FedEx, DHL, UPS and the US Post Office all provide an overnight delivery service, but FedEx shows people how they will feel reassured and have peace of mind if they choose FedEx to ship overnight. FedEx does not own an attribute, but it does own these emotional benefits in people's minds.

When you go back to work, think Starbucks. Think FedEx! Think about how their success is based on delivering emotional benefits, not just product attributes. Then think about what your brand can do to appeal to one or more of your customers' deep-seated emotional needs.



The author, Dr. Charles Kenny, graduated Cum Laude from the University of Notre Dame, and from Clark University, with a Ph.D. in Psychology. He saw the application of his academic expertise to the commercial world early on. After four decades of experience working with dozens of the greatest brands, his client list is a “Who’s Who” of major companies, including 22 of the top 40 advertisers on the Advertising Age list. Using three proprietary methods — Right Brain Research, Emotional Typology and Brand Strategy Workshops — Dr. Kenny and his firm, The Right Brain People® have worked with more than 600 corporate clients and organizations in 225 product and service categories. Today he is recognized as one of the top consumer psychologists and brand strategists in the world.

[1 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/FedEx](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/FedEx)

[2 http://www.fedex.com/us/about/today/access/GreaterAccessChange5_15_06.pdf](http://www.fedex.com/us/about/today/access/GreaterAccessChange5_15_06.pdf)