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OPINION: Being Rational On Emotional Benefits

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By Marc Babej

W E'VE heard it repeated so often that we have almost come to accept it as gospel: to get under consumers' skins, you need to make an "emotional connection" with them. It seems that every ad agency or brand consultancy under the sun

champions "emotional connection," claiming a unique ability to tap it, create it and leverage it. "Emotional," of course, as opposed to "rational," which is frowned upon as a déclassé relic of advertising prehistory.

In reality, the "rational vs. emotional" dichotomy is a convenient post-rationalization (no pun intended) in a marketplace where: a) most products are commodities, without a "rational" differentiator to speak of; and b) marketing services company revenues depend on persuading clients that communications have the power to gloss over a lack of "rational" differentiation.

But convenience is not the same as truth. In actuality, "emotional" is a euphemism for "intangible," while "rational" serves as straw man, to diminish the importance of tangible benefits.

Put your consumer hat on for a moment. What would you choose: a company that offers you the rather postmodern notion of "intangible benefits" or one that offers "tangible benefits?" The broker who really, really cares—so much that he could be mistaken for a family member? Or the broker who gives you reason to believe he'll make you more money? With gas around \$3 a gallon, the midsize car that gets 27 mpg, or a midsize hybrid that gets 51 mpg? The insurance firm that feels your pain, or the one that saves you 15% in 15 minutes? The bank that proffers fortune cookie wisdom on how money really isn't that important, or the one that advertises it is open on weekends? As a rule of thumb: if you can define a tangible benefit for a category, consumers can, too.

Orthodox branding's categorical demand for "emotional connection" is based on a flawed assumption: that brand image communications have the power to substitute for product differentiation. That an "emotional connection" can move consumers to the point of equating imagery with a tangible benefit and, ultimately, manipulate them into paying a premium for commodity products.

Orthodox branding methodology, then, assumes that what's true for a few categories in which image really is the main benefit (soft drinks, liquor, perfume, tobacco, to some degree also entertainment), can be applied across the board. No so fast. These categories offer a rare combination of high interest and relatively low acquisition cost. Quirkiness at \$1.50 a Snapple is a bargain (the iced

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tea is decent, too). Metropolitan chic can be had for \$12 in a Grey Goose martini. An air of timeless elegance goes for \$58 per bottle of Guerlain's L'Heure Bleue. There's hardly a tangible benefit in sight. But more importantly, none is expected. As Charlie in Tim Burton's Charlie & The Chocolate Factory puts it so aptly: "Candy doesn't have to have a point. That's why it's candy."

Take only a half-step away from truly image-driven categories, to luxury accessories, and the expectation of a tangible benefit comes into play. You might buy one Louis Vuitton bag solely because it conveys status, but should a handle rip after a year, you'd think twice about buying another. It's no coincidence that Louis Vuitton submits its products to a testing regimen that would make NASA proud, with mechanical arms lifting handbags loaded with 7-lb. weights and then dropping them onto the floor—for four straight days. The result? Bags of the moment come and go; Louis Vuitton remains.

Upstart airline JetBlue's breakthrough success is also rooted in tangible benefits. Leather seats, DirectTV for every passenger, snazzy flight attendant uniforms . . . and all this at lower fares than competitors. These tangible benefits have not only made JetBlue a force to be reckoned with, but also built a powerful brand. JetBlue has reached an altitude of 113 on BrandKeys' Customer Loyalty index. Meanwhile, established competitors such as American (105) and United (107) are caught in a quagmire of commoditization.

In the majority of categories, marketing (and brand) success is built on a foundation of tangible benefits. Examples include H&M, Commerce Bank and Washington Mutual, Geico and Progressive . . . and of course, the iPod. Long before its white headphones achieved iconic status, iPod had already built its reputation as a tangibly differentiated offering, combining user-friendly design inside and out with sufficient capacity to make music libraries mobile.

In an increasingly transparent, consumer-empowered world, marketers face a choice: either follow branding orthodoxy and capitulate to commoditization—or build a real connection, one that is rooted in tangible benefits and amounts to a reason to choose your offering, not your rival's.

Babej is president at marketing strategy consultancy Reason Inc., New York, which serves technology, financial services, healthcare and media clients. Contact: m.babej@reason-inc.com. Blog: www.being-reasonable.com.

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