

Getting to the heart of your category

By Colin Bates

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One way of understanding your market, and your brand, is to study the core benefits consumers are looking for from your category.

If you want to be a dominant brand, understand the core category benefits...

Take Coca-Cola for example, 'refreshment' is very much a part of the brand. (Visit the Coca-Cola website and you read that Coca-Cola "refreshes people across the world".) This is a benefit that is close to the heart of the drinks category. And this 'heart of the category' positioning is re-enforced with the message that Coca-Cola is "the real thing".

The Marlboro brand is about individuality, masculinity, and a moment of freedom and relaxation. These are all benefits that are close to the heart of the cigarette category, which is why Marlboro is the dominant global cigarette brand.

The NIVEA brand has thrived for over 90 years in the fickle skin care market, with the simple promise that 'NIVEA cares for your skin' - an absolutely 'heart of the category' positioning.

But category benefits can change over time...

In some markets the core category benefit evolves.

Take bottled water for example. In most markets around the world the initial 'heart of the category' benefit is about 'security and safety' - clean, reliable drinking water. But as the market develops the core benefit moves towards added health (the 'revitalizing' effect of vitamins and minerals for example), as well as higher emotional benefits. This is a market evolution that is predictable and therefore useful to understand.

In other markets a 'disruption' can dramatically shift the core benefit in the minds of consumers.

A classic example of this is the U.S. car rental market in the 1960s, when Avis - the No2 in the market - successfully persuaded customers that service was more important than coverage with their "We try harder" program.

The tourist airline industry in Europe offers a more recent example. In the 1990s the 'traditional' airlines were competing to make the tourist in-flight experience better and better, adding more sophisticated service - and cost - every year, (they were following the 'business class' model). In

came the 'budget travel' airlines, offering basic air travel at a much cheaper price. The budget air industry was born, shifting the core benefit for tourist travel in Europe 'back to basics'.

And the implications for you...

Understanding the core benefits that consumers are looking for from your category will help you understand the potential of your own brand: how it can motivate consumers and be distinctive from the competition.

If you manage a dominant brand you need to monitor the evolution of the category, and potential disruption, to ensure that your brand remains 'at the heart of the category'.

If your brand is not the dominant brand you'll still need to track the evolution of the category, to understand if your brand will benefit from this or not, and there may be opportunities for you in creating 'market disruption'.

Ask yourself:

What are the core consumer benefits for my category?

How close is my brand to core category benefits?

Is the category moving towards, or away from, my brand?

Can my brand benefit by creating market disruption?

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