Introducing short-term brands: A new branding tool for a new consumer reality

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Abstract

Consumers exhibit recently an unprecedented willingness to try new brands and a preference for brand-variety over brand-loyalty (even loyalty to a consistent repertoire of brands), resulting in damage to brand survivability. To cope, marketers now need an additional tool to the familiar Long-Term Brand (LTB): the professional creation and management of profitable Short-Term Brands (STB).

INTRODUCTION

Assume that you are about to introduce a new product into the market. If it were a new version of an existing branded product that you already have in the market, for example a new flavour of a dairy product, the inclination would be to extend the brand. Conventional marketing wisdom has it that introducing a new product under a familiar brand name will stimulate more consumers to try it, while saving marketing efforts. When the task is to create a new brand (which usually implies a new product launching, as well), the same conventional wisdom encourages long-term thinking.

'Conventional marketing wisdom' is a system of assumptions and beliefs, so widely accepted that any other possibility seems unlikely. However, is it possible that it might cause us to fail? Is it plausible that in many cases, introducing a new brand would succeed more than extending an existing one, as successful as it may be? Is it even possible that often, long-term planning of brands might lead to business failures? Accumulating data, in Israel and elsewhere, indicates that these conclusions are bound by the new reality in the marketplace. The basic 'truths' of brand theory[1,2] are threatened by a deep change that has taken place in consumer behaviour.

BRANDS IN CRISIS

Experts of competitive strategy[3,4,5,6,7] have been dwelling on the new reality of market frenzy and wild competition for more than a decade. Early in the nineties initial data was published indicating that one of the characteristics of the turbulent marketplace is damage to the survivability of brands, the pinnacle of modern marketing. The damage became manifest in:

— Failure of a high rate of new brands attempting to penetrate the market.
— Shortening of the life expectancy of brands, even successful ones in terms of sales volume.
— Success of lower priced private labels of retail chains, at the expense of established brands.
— Shrinking of the 'premium' the consumer is willing to pay for a known brand (even Marlboro).

For some reason, 1994 was a focal year in this process. Among other voices, *The Economist, The Financial Times* and *The Independent* have all published articles suggesting that brands are in trouble.[8] Gabriel and Lang[9] summed up 'It is now being argued by certain commentators that one hundred years of brands may be drawing to a close'.

Common brand theory maintains that brands are built for the long term and the value of the brand to the marketer (Brand Equity) stems, both directly and indirectly, mainly from consumer loyalty. But it seems that consumer loyalty (even loyalty to a consistent repertoire of brands) is a disappearing phenomenon.

Researchers at Leo Burnett[10] published comprehensive research that trailed brands in the American market during two years of the mid-nineties. The main findings were as follows:

— Most of the brands (60 per cent) lost market-share.
— Only 15 per cent of the brands enjoyed loyalty of the majority of their consumers (according to Leo Burnett's Buyer Strategy Segmentation system).

The research was based on store scanner data for a combined panel of consumers of Nielsen and Information Resources Inc., composed of 28,000 households. The research examined 1,251 brand of packaged goods in 14 consumption categories. Brands that were introduced to the market or left it during these two years were not included.

Susan O'dell and Joan Pajunen chose to give their book the title 'The Butterfly Customer'.[11] This is an apt description when the rate of annual abandonment in categories like cellular phones and credit cards, in Europe and the USA, is about 25 per cent of the customers. The customer base of such a firm changes every 3–4 years.

Consumers are not loyal, because they perpetually move on to new products and brands. 'Actimel', the probiotic yogurt of Danone, was introduced into the Israeli market in December 1998. A survey performed[12] the same month showed that about 15 per cent of the Jewish adult population tried the product within a few weeks.

In the coffee category, in which the consumer is assumed to have lasting preferences, 44 per cent of the instant coffee drinkers have tried Elite's[13] new 'Aroma' within five months of launching in February 1999.[14]

Whoever thinks these swift and sweeping changes are unique to the food market should consider the entry of Teva's 'Meridol'[15] toothpaste to the 19th place on the financial scale of non-food brands in 1998, according to Nielsen Israel. Meridol is now the second most popular toothpaste brand, after Colgate, in a category renowned in the past for its stability due to consumers' firm habits.

Can these success stories be attributed to strong umbrella brands? Apparently, they cannot. A survey conducted in August 1999[16] suggests that 58 per cent of the sample tend to try yogurts in new flavours that are introduced under the brands Danone and Emmi, at least from time to time. Of those who took part in the survey, 81 per cent stated they would have tried such new products even if they were marketed under different brand names. They constitute 92 per cent of those who try new yogurt flavours 'usually' or 'always' (those who try 'usually' or 'always' — 33 per cent). These findings are consistent with Nielsen's evidence that umbrella names have little influence on the success of new brands.[17]

How about more durable and costly products? South Korean cars penetrated the Israeli market in the mid-1990s. In just two years, their combined market share was more than 15 per cent. In 1999 Hyundai was the second best selling brand of family cars and most of them did quite well. Examples are ample in most, if not all, consumer goods and service categories.

Admittedly, the above trend is only a partial description of the current situation. Simultaneously the continuing strength of established mega-brands has been observed. Global brands — such as McDonald's, Nescafé, Nike, Microsoft, Sony and others — unite consumers' way of life worldwide. The interest in brands has never been so acute. Nonetheless, Landor and Interbrand show repeatedly that most of the brands occupying positions in the top 100 list have been there for 25–50 years, suggesting that mega-brands are becoming a rather exclusive club.

Several explanations have been offered in an attempt to understand the reasons for the brand crisis:

— The markets in the USA and Europe are mature and saturated. The growth rate of the market is derived from the natural growth rate of the population. Attempts to introduce additional brands cause 'brand explosion'.
— The dense competition leads to communication overload for the consumer. New brands often fail to have enough impact and the images of existing brands are eroded.
— The fact that products are similar in characteristics and quality makes consumers feel that trying a new and unfamiliar brand is risk-free.
— The competitive pressure leads manufacturers to offer a larger variety of products and product versions in an attempt to answer preferences of decreasing groups (ie variety of car classifications). The result is inability to continually support (in advertising, for example) the entire range.
— Media fragmentation has increased the price of reaching consumers through advertising. Thus, many US marketers resort to database marketing. Alas, direct media that are being used (like mail) are often less effective in creating brand image than mass media (like television). The new interactive media may be creating a new reality in this respect.
— Price competition and intensive use of promotional sales have made companies reluctant to allocate funds for image advertising.

CHANGE IN CONSUMERS' PREFERENCES AND BEHAVIOUR

The aforementioned explanations emphasise behaviour of marketers and its results. Although these explanations are valuable, a further complementary one can be added, which is merging with the trends described above to create the new situation in the marketplace: a radical change in consumers' preferences and behaviour. In fact, it is possible to detect two such changes:

— Unprecedented openness to try, both new products and new brands.
— Preference of brand variety and novelty rather than brand loyalty.

Analysis of TGI Israel 1999 data shows considerable levels of acceptance ('completely agree' and 'tend to agree') of statements expressing willingness to try new products (most consumers use the word 'product' for both 'product' and 'brand'):

—'When I see a new product I usually buy it to try' — 20 per cent.
—'I am often convinced by commercials to buy the advertised product' — 24 per cent
—'I like being in tune with the latest fashion' — 35 per cent.
—'I like buying gadgets and new products for the house' — 36 per cent.
—'I like trying new food products' — 47 per cent.

A survey conducted in February 1999[18] presents the following preferences:

— 11 per cent are of the opinion that new products are usually better than existing ones.
— 15 per cent generally prefer new products to familiar ones in supermarkets/drugstores.
— 54 per cent think that whoever does not try new products is 'out of touch'.
— 58 per cent like to try new products frequently.
— 64 per cent think that whoever does not try new products loses.

Rogers'[19] famous 'Diffusion of Innovations' Curve defines 3 per cent of the population as 'innovators', 14 per cent as 'pioneers', and 34 per cent as 'early majority'. The above data suggests an expansion of these groups by about a third.

The changes that occurred among consumers can be viewed within a wide context of cultural, social and psychological change processes that transpired during the 20th century. These changes are typical of Western opulent societies. The following issues deserve (and have already received) a more elaborated and in-depth discussion. The individual's life in a modern society is characterised by several phenomena worth mentioning:

— Consumers are facing a huge variety of choice options. Revolutions in transportation, communications and information are rendering the world more accessible. Consumers can choose among different places to visit or live in. They are exposed to a large variety of people, cultures, worldviews and lifestyles. They face rich assortments in every aspect of life, including consumption. Furthermore, we are bound to make more and more life shaping choices: our leaders, spouses and professions. Even the responsibility of our identity is, to a great extent, ours. They have the right and even the obligation to 'discover', define and develop ourselves. They choose from a wide social-cultural 'menu' of identities. Social mobility through education and entrepreneurship is without precedent. *The resulting development of human capability to cope with a variety and choose from it (and the legitimisation to invent new possibilities) is one of the most important changes to occur in our time.*
— The exposure to various possibilities evidently undermines our belief in 'one absolute truth' or 'the right way'. This is the phenomenon at the basis of post-modernity. Together with other processes, this fact has weakened social structures and institutions as well as authorities. It enabled a new openness to the different, the other, and the new.
— Due to the weakening of institutionalised sources of legitimacy, the individual faces 'culture', 'society', and even 'the world', without the mediation of a community. Our community is no longer unitary and significant. A community is defined in a flexible and changing manner. We take part of groups that are disconnected from one

another. Some of these communities are imaginary or virtual. Our affiliation is temporary, in many cases.

— The fast pace of changes during the 20th century has led to an erosion in the status of tradition and 'elderly wisdom' in favour of admiring the new and worshipping youth. This is especially true in light of technological developments and the possibility of social and economic success at a young age (in hi-tech or the stock market, for example). 'Routinely, most of the truths a person over 40 grew up believing, are now questioned', wrote Judy Lannon.[20]
— Writers who describe the postmodern era claim that we live in a perpetual 'now' in which the past loses its value and the future is unknown. The focus on the present, to which we are required to adapt quickly, emphasises immediacy. For example: almost constant availability and immediate communication (thanks to E-mail and cellular phones) and other instant gratification (fast food).
— In psychology the notion that we have one integral self, has been questioned. According to Grodin and Lindlof: 'Destabilisation of the self, is one of the characteristics of postmodernity … individuals may find that they no longer need a central core with which to evaluate and act'.[21] Therefore, they can afford to be a 'different person' each time, with different people, in different contexts. According to Kellner: 'Identity becomes more mobile, multiple, personal, self-reflexive and subject to change and innovation'.[22] Radical theoretical approaches[23] describe a coalition of sub-personalities as an alternative model to the common concept of a unitary personality.
— In addition, it must be remembered that life expectancy has grown. 'When life goes on for almost a century' wrote the historian Theodore Zeldin, 'it is time to reconsider whether man wants to dedicate all of it to riding the same bus'.[24]

These phenomena and processes shape a consumer (person) who lives a new reality of life and has new characteristics:

— Many people have more than one career during their working years and certainly work in several organisations. In the February 1999 survey, 36 per cent answered that they had personally undergone a self-willed career change. This finding is supported by the preoccupation of literature and media with 'second career' and by the multitude of routes available for retraining. Even 'IDF 2000', the multi-annual planning of the Israeli army up to 2010, heralds the transfer from long-term and safe careers of professional army personnel to short and worthwhile careers that can compete with civilian positions.[25] In an article concerning pension funds, Aviva Rosen[26] refers to the changes in career patterns: 'In the last decade things overturned. Gold watches received by veterans of two, three or four decades of loyal employment in one company have become a term of derision'.
— Many experience more than one family unit in their lifetime and certainly more than one meaningful intimate relationship. According to the Israeli Central Statistics Bureau, the number of divorces in Israel has reached 8,500 annually, and increasing. This number represents 0.5 per cent of households in the country and 10 per cent of all marriages are dissolved before their 10th anniversary.
— During past decades several theoretical and research approaches were developed to segment and describe consumer groups according to values, attitudes and lifestyle characteristics ('psychographic' descriptions). During the last few years

professionals claim that these segmentations are no longer valid since many consumers of our times 'belong' to different classifications on different days of the week and even during different hours of the day.

— Publicis researchers spotted a new consumption phenomenon of the 1990's: unification of contrasts or the era of 'this and that too'[27] Both men and women no longer accept that career will come at the expense of family life or vice versa — they want both. Consumers want uncompromising combinations of gourmet taste with few calories, beauty and comfort, low price and high quality. They are willing to accept combinations of science and nature, conventional and holistic medicine. The trend created a wave of '2/3/4 … in 1' products: shampoo and conditioner, tooth paste and mouth wash. 'FUSION in the kitchen, design, lifestyle — that is fashionable', writes Aviva Lori, 'A mixture of European-American-Japanese with a delicate flavour of ethnic Peruvian at the edges'.[28]

The emerging portrait is of a person and consumer who is led by a new basic motivation: ambition to exhaust all possibilities and the fear of missing out on something. This motivation might be one of the main causes of the brand crisis described above.

MARKETERS CHANGE THEIR BEHAVIOUR

Once the contemporary consumer and the reality of his life is understood, it is easy to identify the limitations of the present brand theory. A prolonged devotion of the consumer to a brand appears less likely. The author would like to emphasise that he does not claim that long-term brands are obsolete. Nonetheless, it seems that creating them has become more difficult and the chances of success have been reduced. Nevertheless it can be claimed that the common theory does not as yet provide a comprehensive enough solution to address the new behaviour of consumers. Therefore, an adaptation of the theory is necessary. Some of the marketers have already adapted their behaviour to the new reality. Two types of changes can be distinguished:

— *Changes in management of 'regular' brands*
Two versions of long-term brands developed during the history of brands:
1. 'Evolving Brand' — introducing improvements and innovations in a product without altering the brand name. A perfect example is the Power Rangers brand introduced to the market at the beginning of the 1990's. Recently, the fourth generation was presented. Similarly, there are many examples of 'new and improved' products or even a completely new product under the same brand name (tablets instead of powder for dish washers). This approach is different from the classic brand, such as Coca-Cola — a product that does not change.
2. 'Variety Brand' — a wide variety of product versions under the same brand name (Swatch, for example). Many brands have expanded their variety in order to offer different market segments products that suit them ('light' and 'medium' versions of cigarettes) as well as to offer the consumer variety and renewal without having to 'abandon' the brand. As is well known, sometimes brands are being extended to other product categories.

— *Brands planned for a limited 'life expectancy'*
According to common brand theory, a brand that 'lives' a short period of time (when compared to brands of the same product category in the past) is a failure. Recently, however, in many cases a brand is a success in terms of the sales

volume it reaches, but its success is short-lived. In children's entertainment, for example, characters such as Mulan succeed for one season in contrast to Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck in the past. In cars, brands such as Clio are supposed to succeed for 5–7 years in contrast to Ford Fiesta or Renault 5. There is a great variance in life expectancies of brands among product categories, of course.

The term 'short-term brand' does not yet exist in the language of marketing professionals. To many it will sound like a paradox since according to common brand theory, brands are 'meant to last for the long term'. Nonetheless, many marketers have begun to introduce brands anticipating that their life expectancy be limited. Changes in management of such brands, were intuitive, lacking an organising term and a 'short-term brand theory', and were often done in an atmosphere of resignation to reality.

If the following list of examples of brands that were successful during a relatively short period of time are reviewed, it will be recalled that in all of these categories, consumers behaved more consistently ('brand loyalty') in previous generations. The categories are extremely diverse: food (frozen yogurt); toiletries and cosmetics (CK1); diets (Slim-Fast); games (Tamaguchi); entertainment (Pocahontas); music (disco); vacation destinations (Palma De-Majorca); exercise (aerobics); technology (Pentium); cars (Punto); and there are many more.

SHORT-TERM BRANDS (STB)

Most of those who reacted to the changes in the marketplace described above, assumed that a bigger effort must be made and act a little differently in order to continue and create long-term brands (LTB). A further option may be presented: professional and purposeful creation of short-term brands. The main reason to plan short-term brands is the fact that consumers have made many brands 'short term' anyway. The data presented indicates that the chances that a new brand will succeed in the short term are larger than its chances to succeed in the long term. Consumers' willingness to try a new brand does not fall short of their willingness to try a familiar and extended brand, and might even surpass it.

Based on consultations with managers and participants in seminars conducted on the issue, many marketers accept short-term brands at first as bad news ('why invest in something for the short term?'). There is, also, an understandable tendency to explain away a new concept by seeing it as merely a new name to a known one. Some mistake short-term brands to be a renaming of trendy products or fads. This may lead to missing the true potential of the new concept. Characteristics of trendy products and fads are indeed noticeable in short-term brands, but they are now evident in more product categories than ever before, thus creating a qualitatively new phenomenon.

Even if short-term brands were conceived under duress, they do present a new kind of business opportunity to marketers, because they offer the consumers benefits that are not present in long-term brands.

It is widely accepted that beyond the function of the product, brands offer the consumer social and psychological 'value added'. The main means to create such value is, in most cases, advertising. Advertising a brand is often meant to create a desire to purchase it by arousing in the consumer expectations to benefit. When the benefit stems from the function of the product, the role of advertising is to make evident in the consumer's mind the advantages of the brand as a source of benefit compared to alternatives. In contrast, when benefit is 'value added' the expectation to benefit is a self-fulfilling prophecy. The mere expectation of the consumer, and sometimes his environment, to benefit — is the source of the benefit.

Several types of 'value added' are familiar to us since they characterise long-term brands:

— Known brands reduce anxiety regarding mistakes in choice and contribute to making our reality more predictable. Choice requires less effort.
— Some brands, according to their symbolic meanings, enable consumers to demonstrate affiliation to a certain social group, status, or certain identity (Yuppie /intellectual/bohemian). Sophisticated consumers use various brands at various times in order to 'get into' the role, and also to communicate it to others.
— Consumption of certain brands is useful to strengthening self-perception as 'sophisticated', 'conscientious', 'updated'…
— The advertisements of established brands constitute a source of authority to learning accepted values and norms of behaviour: what is 'right', what is 'good', what will bring happiness?
— Sometimes brands serve as 'the long arm' of the consumer, 'doing something that I would like to do myself but cannot' (eg save the rain forests), or 'acting as I would like to but dare not' (provocative, protesting, rebellious).
— Certain brands participate in the internal dialogue helping enlist motivation for action.
— Some brands facilitate fantasies of omnipotence, of unlimited sex appeal, of importance, of adventure …
— An additional type of sophisticated brands are those that formulate in the consumers' minds a promise of a certain feeling and consuming the product becomes a means to 'connect' to that feeling and experience it (much like buying a ticket to a certain genre of film).

Short-term brands also offer the consumer 'value added' benefits. A preliminary study of focus groups conducted in the spring of 1999[29] helped distinguish the psychological and social benefits that consumers gain through buying new brands:

— It signals to others that you are up-to-date ('cool', 'fashionable'), part of a continuous signaling of affiliation and even status.
— It conveys a message of 'youthfulness'.
— It strengthens the self-image of a 'modern person' and nurturing a feeling of livelihood and connection to what is happening in the world around us.
— It provides a feeling of refreshment, renewal, stimuli, invigoration.
— It caters for mood management (breaking routine, liberation from a feeling of 'being stuck').
— 'New' sometimes implies improved quality ('the most updated') which increases security in the choice.

The focus groups study revealed that finding and trying new brands constitutes a factor in the marital, familial and social life. Openness to the new is obvious mainly in products with experiential and/or social character and is also found in products like toothpaste or body lotion (to which 'the skin gets used to it and it stops being effective after a period of time', as one of the participants testified …).

Evidence to the 'value added' benefits of buying new brands was also found in the rate of agreement to statements in the February 1999 survey:

— 'When I am in a bad mood I sometimes buy new products to improve it' — 22 per cent.
— 'I buy new products in order to break the routine and relieve boredom' — 38 per cent.
— 'When I buy a new product I feel refreshed' — 55 per cent.

Each type of brand, long term and short term, fulfils a basic human need. Long term, the need of stability, continuity, and security. Short term — the need of renewal and of sensual, emotional and intellectual stimulation.

HOW TO MANAGE SHORT-TERM BRANDS

This paper endeavours to formulate a knowledge base for creating and managing short-term brands started with learning from the accumulated experience in marketing and advertising products and services in fields in which brands typically have limited life expectancy: fashion, movies, children's games, etc. To that, observations have been added and generalisations made from occurrences of short lived but indisputable successes of brands in other categories. It has reviewed professional literature, talked with managers, and analyzed dozens of cases. The limited scope of the present paper precludes the possibility of presenting the conclusions in full (including the organisational and financial aspects of managing short-term brands). Nonetheless, the following are several principles and practical suggestions that might be useful.

Analyzing characteristics of those who agreed with TGI statements indicating a tendency to try new products, as well as a cluster analysis performed on the findings of the February 1999 survey, raise the following description of the most significant target group for short-term brands (about a quarter of the population):

A high rate of women and of ages 25–45 (thereby a high rate of families with children under 16-years old), income level tends to be average and above, high rate of employees, secular, modern lifestyle (ie frozen food), tendency towards entertainment and attention to appearance. Level of interest in the news, in actuality, documentary and even sports on television, is lower than among the rest of the population. In contrast, interest in talk shows, TV games, films, satire and cultural programmes — is relatively high. They enjoy commercials more than the rest of the population. Psychologically, it seems that these people are adaptable, emphasise social life, self-monitoring and escapists to a certain extent.

It is particularly advisable to create a short-term brand when a strong market leader already exists, when technology is unstable, when market experience indicates a short lived interest of the consumer in brands, as well as in product categories in which one or more of the following apply:

- Product consumption is accompanied by sensual experience.
- Use of the product is public/observable and connected with social interaction or can be used as a topic for conversation.
- Benefit of the product is doubtful but the desire for the benefit is strong (diets) or the benefit perceived is at the fantasy level.

When introducing a short-term brand to the market, it is recommended to consider the following:

- The product will usually be based on a formula that has succeeded in the past, with the addition of no more than one new element.
- The product will be simple to understand and use, and will be offered at a limited number of versions.
- The packaging will be remarkable and unique.
- Usually the product will contain something current and fashionable (design, colour, an associative name …).
- The price will not be high compared to the category, and often special penetration price and payment terms will be offered to ease the purchase.

- Combination of advertising, public relations, and rumours will create an expectation prior to penetration.
- There will be early marketing to opinion leaders.
- Special terms will be offered to large and organised groups of consumers.
- Most of the marketing effort will be made during penetration. Advertising will be concentrated in a short period of time (reminders will be used for multi-seasonal products), advertising channels will enable high frequency of exposure, the theme will emphasise novelty, will be especially dramatic and utilise popular elements (celebrity, hit song …).
- To create swift and wide-scoped trial, sales promotion will be conducted (launching events, co-operation with complementary products, samples/tasting/test drives, sale together with a familiar product).
- A variety of distribution channels, some unusual, will be used in order to ensure maximum accessibility.
- In many cases, a short-term brand will be introduced under the 'auspices' of another brand (ie manufacturer name) which is not at the centre of advertising and does not have a rich meaning to the consumer. Its role is merely to alleviate apprehensions regarding quality of the product. in the author's experience, this point creates confusion. Apparently, it infers that the short-term brand is a sub-brand of a main (and of course a long-term) brand. This conclusion is mistaken and stems from the hierarchical approach, of branding levels, in the accepted brand theory. A more precise distinction will be between a 'background' and a 'frontal' brand. The background brand is a long-term brand that is not emphasised, and its role is to reduce perception of risk by the consumer. The frontal short-term brand is, under the headlights, and the source of value added benefits to the consumer.

When managing short-term brands, it should be remembered that the last judge of the brand's fate is the consumer. The same way a brand that was planned for the long term may prove to be a short term one, the opposite is also possible. One typical danger in managing short-term brands is the tendency to 'kill them' before they exhaust their inherent potential. A careful tracing and monitoring of consumer's brand benefit expectations and behaviour is essential to correct navigation in the strong and unpredictable currents of the marketing reality in which we operate.

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