

Developing Brands with Qualitative Market Research

Mike Owen



Developing Brands with
Qualitative Market
Research





The seven volumes of *Qualitative Market Research: Principle and Practice* provide complete coverage of qualitative market research practice. It offers commercial practitioners authoritative source texts for training and professional development, and provides academic students and researchers an account of qualitative research theory and practice in use today. Each book cross-references others in the series, but can also be used as a stand-alone resource on a key topic.

- ① *An Introduction to Qualitative Market Research*
Mike Imms and Gill Ereaut
- ② *Interviewing Groups and Individuals in Qualitative Market Research*
Joanna Chrzanowska
- ③ *Methods Beyond Interviewing in Qualitative Market Research*
Philly Desai
- ④ *Analysis and Interpretation in Qualitative Market Research*
Gill Ereaut
- ⑤ *Developing Brands with Qualitative Market Research*
John Chandler and Mike Owen
- ⑥ *Developing Advertising with Qualitative Market Research*
Judith Wardle
- ⑦ *Delivering Results in Qualitative Market Research*
Geraldine Lillis

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Jon Chandler and Mike Owen |



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The early chapters of this book have been informed by the literature that is available in both the academic and commercial research worlds. In the remaining chapters we have had to rely much more on our own knowledge and experience, built up over 20 or more years of work in the commercial market research environment, as much less has been written down when it comes to understanding how research can directly impact on branding and the development of brands. In so doing we have drawn heavily on the views and experience of a wide range of practitioners with whom we have had the privilege to work in various capacities. There are too many people to name individually within this text but, as their influence at various times has been considerable, we would like specifically to mention: Martin Callingham, Peter Cooper, Andrew Day, David Fenton, Barry Gowers, Graham Griffiths, Bill Hart, Giles Lenton, Oliver Murphy, Mike Pepp, John Poortah, Udo Reuter, Malcolm Scott, Alan Swindells, and Mike Young.

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Editorial Introduction

About Qualitative Market Research: A Background to the Series

Gill Ereaut, Mike Imms and Martin Callingham

This series of books explains the theory and practice of qualitative market research, or commercial qualitative research. There is no single agreed definition of qualitative market research but we can paraphrase some key definitions and describe it thus:

A form of market research that seeks to explore and understand people's attitudes, motivations and behaviours – the 'why' and 'how' behind the 'what' – using methods that seek to reach understanding through dialogue and evocation (rather than measurement). Qualitative research generally attempts to make sense of and interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them.

In UK practice, which forms the focus of this series, the most common form of qualitative market research employs the group discussion (or 'focus group') and depth interview as its major field methods, although many other methods can be and are increasingly used, such as observational approaches.

Common to all methods is the aim of getting beyond public, conscious factors – those things that people can and will say in response to simple questions. Qualitative market research provides effective ways of exploring such issues as private thoughts and feelings, pre-conscious factors (such as intuitive associations, the taken-for-granted, habitual and culturally derived attitudes and behaviours), and the important issue of emotions. Also used within qualitative market research are techniques that enable researchers to overcome the limitations of the verbal.

The main objectives of qualitative market research usually involve one or more of the following:

- **Diagnosis** – providing depth of understanding of a current situation, of why things are the way they are.
- **Prognosis** – providing guidance on likely responses to options, plans or proposals.

- **Creativity** – using respondents in qualitative market research as a source of ideas, innovation and inspiration.

What users of qualitative market research have in common is a need for *understanding and sense-making*.

- It aims to reveal deep and specific understanding of activities, choices and attitudes relevant to client concerns across a range of stakeholders. These stakeholders are not simply consumers and customers, users of the goods and services of commercial organisations – increasingly qualitative market research is used by a wide range of not-for-profit organisations.
- The insights generated include an understanding of the interrelationships of issues, as well as the detail of individual issues.
- Qualitative market research offers a conceptual and not just descriptive view of these issues.
- It may also serve to codify tacit and informal knowledge of the external world and make it accessible to organisations.

It is hard to pinpoint the exact date and place of birth of commercial qualitative research but essentially it is a phenomenon of the post-Second World War era and arose in response to changing information needs of organisations. Initially it was marketers who began to recognise that meeting consumer wants and needs required a level of understanding of people's motivations, usage and attitudes that went beyond measurement of the 'simple, hard facts' accessible to survey methods.

The qualitative market research profession has undoubtedly 'come of age' – with an established and respected role within the decision-making procedures of a wide and diverse variety of commercial, not-for-profit and public sector organisations across the globe. It is hard to find any *commercial* organisation that does *not* now use qualitative market research, but within the past decade or so the range of organisations using commercial qualitative market research to aid organisational decision-making has broadened considerably. Qualitative market research has become a valuable tool for anyone who needs to take account of any 'stakeholder' groups – not just consumers and customers but also staff, users of public services, supporters, voters, inmates and so on.

The evolution of the qualitative market research profession has several distinctive characteristics.

- It has apparently evolved in parallel with, but completely separately from, the academic qualitative research community which exists today across many disciplines in the social sciences and humanities.
- Relatively few textbooks have been written about qualitative market research and many external commentators have noted that the

profession has a sparse literature, and limited discussion of issues that concern academic researchers, such as epistemology.

- The early qualitative market researchers drew on a body of theory that came principally from psychology, but over the decades this has broadened to include other social sciences disciplines and methods (anthropology, sociology, cultural analysis, semiotics etc.), as well as continuing to develop methodology from emergent trends in psychology.
- Theory has tended to be incorporated and used in qualitative market research in a 'serendipitous' way. Few qualitative market researchers have been interested in theory for its own sake, but only for its utility value, applicability and usefulness in meeting clients' needs for relevant information and insights. A key characteristic of commercial qualitative market research is its eclecticism and important benefits arise from this *absence* of theoretical or methodological purism.

Why has this series been created? First, the industry has an essentially 'oral' tradition and a major aim of this series has been to record this tradition in written form. Simply setting down what is common practice, along with beliefs about why things are done like this, has not been done before in such a comprehensive way. Like all oral traditions, that of the qualitative research industry sometimes lacks consistency and its 'narrators' do not always agree on its origins. We make no apology for the fact that the reader will find evidence of this in slightly differing accounts and differing attributions of key principles. One of the benefits of creating this series is that such differences become manifest and can be debated and perhaps reconciled by future writers on commercial qualitative market research.

Secondly, as the industry has grown in size and matured, and as its body of (largely tacit) knowledge has grown and broadened, the link between the theories originally informing it and day-to-day practice has tended to weaken. The limited interest in questions of methodology and theory for their own sake warrants comment – and there are probably two main reasons for this.

- First, the nature of clients' demand for commercial qualitative market research means that its value rests solely on the value of the *findings themselves* – rather than the detailed means of reaching those findings.
- Secondly, client organisations have, for the same reason, consistently shown little interest in theory – it has restricted commercial value in commercial qualitative market research.

This is in contrast to much academic qualitative research, where the contributions of a study to methodological and theoretical knowledge may be regarded as at least as valuable as the substantive findings themselves, and certainly need to be reported. There is now more interest within qualitative market research in understanding the roots of everyday practice in order to enhance training and professional development.

Thus a second key aim of this series is to attempt to re-connect practice to theory.

Commercial qualitative market research has until very recently focused almost, though not entirely, on interview-based methods – ‘groups and depths’. This is quite different from much academic qualitative research, which draws on a far broader range of methods. Here again, the reasons have to do with the nature of the demand for commercial qualitative market research. In short, the commercial qualitative market research industry has very effectively ‘systematised’ interview-based qualitative procedures. In consequence there is a large and established market *and* a commercially viable established ‘going rate’ for interview-based commercial qualitative research that simply does not exist, at least at present, for other methods.

Within the limitations of interviewing methods, commercial qualitative market research has been incredibly creative. This creativity ranges from the application of sophisticated projective and enabling techniques and extensive use of stimulus material, to differing moderating styles, interview lengths, structures and procedures to extend the boundaries of what can be explored and captured within ‘groups and depths’.

The qualitative market research business has developed specialisms, involving specific theories, methods and ideas of best practice:

- relating to particular types of respondents – children, business-to-business, staff etc.
- relating to particular types of topic – social policy, advertising development, new product development, packaging design, design and layout of stores, branch offices and websites etc.
- relating to specific business sectors – for example the pharmaceutical industry makes extensive use of qualitative market research, but tends to use quite tailored interview procedures and sampling methods, and specialist moderators.

Representing the full range of practice across all these fields is beyond the scope of this series, which aims to cover the primary research processes within mainstream practice, and two of the major applications of qualitative market research – the development of brands and the development of advertising. To the extent that many general principles, and certain aspects of practice, are shared across many varieties of qualitative market research, it will nevertheless be of relevance to many of these specialists.

The series has been written for the benefit of four main types of reader.

- First, **practitioners** (including those new to the profession) constitute a major audience for the series. By spelling out the key theories and principles that underpin good practice we hope practitioners can use this knowledge to train future generations of qualitative researchers – and also to make more informed choices of methodology and practice. By tracing back relevant theory and linking it to current practice, we aim to raise the conscious competence of current and future practitioners.

- Secondly we hope **users** of qualitative market research will find the series interesting and that it will enable them to make more informed assessments about the kind of contribution qualitative market research can make to organisational decision-making. It should also help them assess the quality of qualitative market research provided by their agencies and to recognise *good* qualitative market research.
- Thirdly, **students** of business and related disciplines may find it a helpful aid to understanding the role and value of qualitative market research in decision-making and how it works in real life practice.
- Finally, **academic qualitative researchers** may find the insight into commercial qualitative market research informative, given that so little is published about it. Commercial confidentiality means that the findings of few commercial qualitative market research projects will ever be made available, but this series at least exposes the principles and practice of qualitative market research in general terms.

In a more general sense, we hope that by being more explicit about what we do and why we do it, we can encourage constructive criticism. Specifically we hope to stimulate debate and to challenge others to identify better and different methods and practices.

All the books in this series have been written by respected qualitative market research practitioners, and as editors we are pleased that an unexpected benefit has arisen. The act of creating this series often involved analysing and setting down current practice for the first time. In so doing, a level of understanding of our business has emerged which was not evident to any of us before undertaking this comprehensive task. This emergent theory is described within several of the books in the series.

THE SCOPE OF THIS SERIES

The series comprises seven books, covering three broad categories. All the books are written primarily from a UK perspective, but where appropriate, authors have drawn comparisons with other markets, especially the USA.

- Book 1 provides an **introduction to qualitative market research** which contextualises the rest of the series. It also explores why it is that organisations might need qualitative market research and how it fits with their information needs and decision-making processes. This book, in addition, explores important issues not specifically addressed in other volumes, including the detail of project design, and the ethics and professional codes which underpin practice.
- Four other volumes describe the theory and methods of the key **processes** of commercial qualitative market research: interview-based fieldwork (Book 2); other forms of data collection (Book 3); analysis

and interpretation of findings (Book 4); and the development and 'delivery' of recommendations to clients (Book 7).

- Two further volumes – Books 5 and 6 – describe the theory and methods of two of the most significant **applications** of commercial qualitative market research – brand and advertising development.

Before going on to outline the scope and role of this particular book in the series, we would like to acknowledge the many people who helped in different ways to make this series a reality. We would particularly like to thank David Silverman for introducing us to Sage and for encouragement at the early stages; and the team at Sage, especially Michael Carmichael and Vanessa Harwood, for their support.

About this Book

This book on brands represents one of two volumes within the series that address the content of typical qualitative market research projects, rather than any specific processes. (The other concerns advertising.)

Projects about brands represent a large proportion of commercial qualitative research activity – and moreover qualitative market research is uniquely placed to provide valuable insights into brands and brand activity. For these reasons, detailed discussions of brands and the use of qualitative market research to explore and understand brands is a vital aspect of this series.

The importance of brands to organisations is already well documented, and we should point out that 'brands' and notions of brand management apply to anything that seeks to generate consumer/stakeholder loyalty and affinity. This, of course includes goods and services – but also such diverse entities as TV stations, holiday resorts, political parties, charities etc., all of whom seek to manage and shape their 'reputations', the values and attributes for which they are known and recognised.

The other important point that this book demonstrates is that it is not enough for the professional qualitative market research practitioner simply to understand and be expert in the skills of qualitative research. Four additional sets of skill and knowledge are also needed if the qualitative market research practitioner is to make a positive contribution to the client's brand-building activity.

- The practitioner has to have a clear understanding of the concept and practice of brands and brand management, as well as the marketing and consumer theory that underpins all these. In this respect, the book provides a detailed and most useful review of relevant brand theory and concepts.
- To be practical and usable, qualitative market research findings need to be based on a recognition that brands exist in the real world – and an understanding of how brands exist in the minds of consumers. Again, this book provides a thorough review of this issue and its implications for qualitative market research practice.
- Having acquired this contextual knowledge, the qualitative market researcher needs to align this brand, consumer and marketing theory with the need to apply and explore it with respondents in research, within the capabilities of qualitative market research. There are various ways in which qualitative research is uniquely able to explore vital aspects of brands – and these become clear in the text. Chapter 4 is particularly important in explaining why organisations that value and manage brands need qualitative insights.

- Finally, qualitative market research provides effective methodologies and techniques that enable consumers to express their thoughts and feelings about brands and brand activity. Although this book (and indeed the series) is not a 'how ...' to guide, Chapter 7 provides a comprehensive catalogue of the 'toolkit' of techniques that qualitative market research offers for brand exploration.

All of this knowledge needs to be applied in different and appropriate ways in the various stages of designing projects, conducting fieldwork, analysing and interpreting findings and developing recommendations. Here again, this book guides the reader through this complexity.

Books on brands and books on qualitative market research are not unique – but this book is unique in bringing the two subjects together. As such, the principal and considerable contribution of this book is to provide a very complete digest – at both a theoretical and practical level – of both brands and branding and the issues involved in using qualitative market research to explore brands.



Introduction: The Nature of Brands

This chapter explores the origins, nature and character of brands. By examining how different researchers and commentators have talked about brands and the assumptions about brands which underpin qualitative research practice, we arrive at an overall view of what brands are and what they do. In particular, here we try to look at the richness and variety within the world of brands.

OUR WORLD OF BRANDS

Most people in the contemporary Western world, and many others elsewhere, have an intuitive understanding of what brands are. People are surrounded by brands; we live in a 'brand-rich environment':

Coca-Cola, 7-Up, Fanta, Tango, Orangina
Budweiser, Rolling Rock, Molson, Stella Artois, Heineken
Ford, Jaguar, BMW, Vauxhall, Fiat, Alfa Romeo
Theakstons, Ruddles, Youngs, Courage, Websters
Daz, Ariel, Radion, Omo, Fairy Snow
Fairy Liquid, Sunlight, Persil, Squeezy, Palmolive
Colgate, Macleans, Eucryl, Aquafresh, Sensodine
Mars, Snickers, Bounty, Twix, Lion
Scottish Equitable, Virgin, Allied Dunbar, National Mutual,
Scottish Widows
Harley Davidson, Triumph, Ducati, Yamaha, Honda
Sony, Ferguson, Amstrad, Pioneer, Aiwa
Benetton, Paul Smith, Versace, Marks and Spencer, The Gap
Chanel, Jean Paul Gaultier, Estée Lauder, Nina Ricci, Yves Saint
Laurent
Ski, Dairy Crest, Muller, Danone, Shape
Clover, Flora, Benecol, Olivio, Utterly Butterly
Adidas, Nike, Reebok, Dunlop, Puma
Lloyds TSB, HSBC, Natwest, Barclays, Halifax

With some exceptions, these strings of brands would be widely recognised by many people in Britain today. In some cases the same would be true across much of the Western world and in some cases recognition might even approach a global scale. Most consumers who are active in the markets that these 'strings' represent would have something to say about most of the brands in that string. Moreover, with some help (from qualitative research) they could express more about how they felt about these brands, their orientation to these brands, how they were seen in relation to one another and how they fitted into consumers' lives.

Brands have become the major phenomenon of consumer society. They are at the heart of the new economy of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. In the contemporary world brands have become increasingly central and important in economic, cultural and psychological terms. There is widespread recognition from both friends and critics of the consumer society that the marketing enterprise has become increasingly fundamental to the modern economy.

Some of the critics of the modern economy have seen the central product of consumer capitalism as the consumer (Gramsci 1971; Lasch 1978). For Naomi Klein (2000), companies no longer make products, instead they produce images of brands, the real 'production' has moved from the factory floor to marketing. In some accounts 'the consumer' has been negatively portrayed as constantly anxious, insecure and ill at ease and seeking to resolve these problems through an endless and ultimately unsatisfying consumption. Alternatively, the consumer can be portrayed more positively as actively exploiting opportunities for self-realisation, comfort and fulfilment through consumption. Whichever is the case, there is nevertheless a common agreement that marketing, the consumer and consumer psychology are some of the key central facets of the modern economy and of modern society.

THE HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The emergence of the brand as a consumer phenomenon is historically linked with the emergence of industrial and 'post-industrial' society. The brand in its modern incarnation has as its prerequisites the development of product standardisation through mass production. It requires an economy that is no longer focused upon the skill of the individual craft and guild member, but is centrally focused upon manufacturers on a larger and ultimately global scale. Whilst there are many pre-industrial examples of large-scale production of goods in, for example, iron or pottery, it is not until the 1840s that standardised engineering mass production began, initially in the American firearms industry, and became the central hallmark of the industrial and post-industrial ages.

The rise of the brand also occurs against a backdrop of massive sociological change. A recurrent theme of nineteenth-century social philosophy

and the social commentators of the twentieth-century has been the changing nature of the individual's relationship to society in the industrial, modern, post-industrial, postmodern, etc., etc. world. Whilst the language changes, the story remains broadly the same. More traditional communities in which people were tightly bonded, both emotionally and in terms of social constraints, have been or are being increasingly replaced by looser bases of association. These bring greater personal freedom but at a loss of a sense of personal belonging or at least a changed sense of personal belonging (Durkheim 1960; Tonnies 1955).

There are also other changes to the broader social framework. A common theme of commentators upon contemporary Western society is that traditional frames of reference whether political/ideological (Lasch 1978) or religious/philosophical (Berger 1973; Luckmann 1967) are in decline. The sense of meaning that these reference points once gave has evaporated, the orientational functions once performed by religious and political institutions and movements have to some extent become 'invisible' (Chandler 1981; Luckmann 1967). Understanding and interpreting the world is increasingly the job of the individual creating his own 'bricolage' of meaning out of what is culturally available (Lévi-Strauss 1966). The 'postmodern' consumer lives in an environment that is less concrete and less stable (Cornish 2001).

Increasingly it seems it is the world of marketing with its new weaponry of branding that is invading this vacuum. It is interesting that where religion or politics have successfully combated this secularisation tendency in Western society it has often been through the employment of more or less sophisticated marketing. When politicians talk about their party's brand equity, or religious leaders talk about appealing to a broader target audience, we know that something has changed.

THE ECONOMICS OF BRANDS

Beyond the 'What is a brand?' question that will occupy our attention in much of this book, there is also the 'What is the point of a brand?' question. Here there are two directions to pursue: what are the potential benefits of brands for the consumer, and conversely what are the potential benefits from the supplier's position?

This book is really dedicated to what brands are and how qualitative market research can aid the processes of branding and understanding brands. However, before we approach these issues, some recognition of the commercial benefits of a brand is worthwhile.

Markus Irmscher (1993) has noted two dramatic cases testifying to the 'bottom line' value of brands; the purchase of Kraft by Phillip Morris for over 600 per cent of its 'book value' and the purchase of Rowntree by Nestlé for over 500 per cent of its 'book value'. Increasingly, brand equity has become a key factor in determining corporate value. 'Brand equity' is about a current and future potential value that has been created by what

the exercise of branding has managed to achieve within a particular consumer culture (Biel 1997; see also Laforet and Saunders 1994). As Blackett notes 'Brands can acquire considerable value as long as they are kept in good shape by their owners and continue to offer consumers the qualities they desire' (Blackett 1992: 70). To reinforce the point, Blackett cites ten brands that were No. 1 in their markets in 1923 and were still there in 1992: for example, Coca-Cola, Ever Ready, Gillette and Wrigley. Here the value of brands lies somewhere in the difference between use and exchange value (Baudrillard 1998).

Financial brand equity is a reality precisely because of what brands can offer at a commercial level:

- Although it does not have to, a strong brand may be able to **command a price premium** over competitor brands (Feldwick and Bonnal 1995).
- Strong brands offer a greater potential to successfully **defend their market share** against the activity of competitors and new arrivals (Reuter 1993).
- Strong brands offer the potential to **grow market share** through the growth of the brand itself or through the development of line extensions and brand leveraging (Kapferer 1997; Verlinden 1993).

To summarise, brands are clearly of critical importance in twenty-first-century consumer society. We are surrounded by brands; they allow us to express ourselves as modern or post-modern consumers; they invade the spaces left by religion and politics in an increasingly secular society; and they are fundamental to the economy of this new century. For companies 'brand equity' is often the key determinant of corporate value and the creation of strong brands is often the driving force behind corporate decision-making. We aim to show how qualitative market research makes a crucial contribution both to our understanding of brands and in determining their relative success in the marketplace.

DEFINING BRANDS

The brands listed on the previous pages are united by one feature: most qualitative research practitioners (and most people in the branding business) would recognise these as 'brands'. In spite of differences in the people who consume them, in their markets and in manufacturer or 'brand owner', they all retain something in common that makes them recognisable as brands.

The concept of a brand relates to an enormous variety of things in the real world. On the one hand commentators talk of 'Honda' or 'BMW' as brands; on the other hand they also talk of 'Post-It' as a brand. At a technical level there is an enormous difference between the engineering complexity of the modern motor car (and the support network underlying

it) and a little piece of paper with an adhesive strip at one end. In this sense there is a vast difference between these products, and yet marketers recognise some common elements between these. Thus, before we can start to explore the business of how to research brands, we need to identify first of all what that something is that makes a brand.

Part of the problem of talking about brands and branding is that these words are used in different ways at different times. Mary Goodyear has expressed this theme well:

it is not always clear what exactly is being referred to when the word brand is used ... I seem to have missed out on any centralised debate and conclusion as to agreed terminology. (Goodyear 1992: 38)

Or alternatively, the problem is seen as somehow inherent in brands themselves:

Brands can vary enormously in character, from simple labels that say what the origin of goods is to complex identity systems that embrace what could almost be termed a personality. (Blackett 1992: 69)

In essence, when it comes to the subject of brands and brand development research, the 'tradition', which it is our goal to articulate, has only been thought through to a limited degree. Moreover, within what is written and spoken, there is a variety of differing assumptions. Nevertheless, in trying to address the issues of brand development research we have found it most useful to capture the qualitative tradition through published literature, articles, conference papers, training notes and so on. Collectively these form a rich starting point from which we can ask the question 'How do qualitative researchers think about brands?'

Mike Imms has attempted a singular definition of a brand, synthesising a number of others. He sees a brand as:

a recognised shorthand (a symbol, visual identity, words, etc.) ... to which consumers/users attach beliefs, associations, ideas, values, feelings, mythologies, etc. which gives value ... over and above the intrinsic value of the goods and services to which the brand is attached. (Imms 2000a: 1)

Wendy Gordon, who over three decades has probably contributed more than anyone else to setting down some of the UK qualitative research tradition, has likewise attempted a similar definition:

A product or service to which human beings attach a bundle of tangible (functional product and service characteristics) and intangible (emotional and/or symbolic) meanings that add value. A brand has one strategic purpose and that is to differentiate itself from competitors. (Gordon 1999: 324)

Lesley de Chernatony and Francesca Dall'Olmo Riley (1997) are some of those who have sought to develop an understanding of brands by

drawing together accounts of what a brand is from different brand consultants. Here they identify nine different 'themes': a legal instrument, a differentiating device, a company, an identity system, an image in consumers' minds, a personality, a relationship, adding value and an evolving identity. Within this they see definitions of a brand varying according to whether they are driven by the manufacturers' or consumers' perspectives. Ultimately they conclude that many different but overlapping definitions of what a brand is can co-exist. This multiple and variable definition theme also recurs elsewhere (see, for example, Imms 2000b).

The branding literature is peppered with definitions of what a brand is, with defining characteristics of brands and so on. All of these are more or less useful. However, it is in some ways more interesting to explore and review these for what they add to our overall understanding of brands. Here it may be more valuable to try to draw together all of the elements that are encountered in the disparate tradition of branding research and ask what does all this tell us about the nature of brands? Out of this we have developed a kind of identikit picture of the characteristics and dimensions of brands. Reviewing the brand and branding literature we find a number of consistent and recurrent themes; again and again commentators talk about brands not in the same way but in ways that have some recurrent similarities. Much of this common ground focuses on issues of 'what brands are'. Here, although expressed in a wide variety of different ways, there is almost a universal view of

- **Brands as meaning systems:** brands are made up of a web of conscious 'knowledge' and subjective associations and impressions, not all of which may be conscious.

Beyond this very prominent notion of brands as meaning systems there is also much commentary which goes beyond what brands are and actually focuses on issues of 'what brands do'. Here much of what is to be found in the brand and branding literature, and much of what underpins the way that practitioners talk about brands, can be captured within nine key themes:

- **Brands as causal:** the idea that brands impact on behaviour.
- **Brands as authentication:** the idea that brands establish a 'product' as genuine, giving it some form of guarantee.
- **Brands as differentiators:** the idea that brands establish a sense of difference from other entities in the same realm of choice.
- **Brands as coherent:** the idea that the meaning system that makes up any one brand has a distinct 'shape' unlike any other.
- **Brands as cultural icons:** the proposition that brands exist simultaneously at both a cultural and individual level.
- **Brands address needs:** the idea that brands cater to consumers' emotional and psychological needs as well as practical demands.

- **Brands and orientation:** the idea that brands are often bound up with processes of identity formation, expression and orientation.
- **Brands as contract:** the proposition that consumers make implicit 'deals' with brands that bind the brand to delivery.
- **Brands as charismatic:** the quite difficult and challenging idea that the allure or magic of brands helps to resolve issues or problems that can not be resolved rationally.

WHAT BRANDS ARE ... BRANDS AS MEANING SYSTEMS

The idea that brands are meaningful is without doubt the most universal theme in branding literature. Here brands are seen as in large part made up of a collection of values, ideas and associations, feelings, emotions and so on that come together to make up a more or less coherent identity (see, for example, Collins and Carey 1983; Farquhar et al. 1992).

Again, here we see the idea that a brand is somehow a larger entity than the product or products it is associated with. 'Factories make products, consumers buy brands ... a brand is not the producer's but the consumer's idea of the product' (Pitcher 1985: 241). Again, to restate what would be regarded as a truism by most qualitative researchers, when consumers buy brands they do it on both a practical and symbolic level (Lannon and Cooper 1983).

This proposition of brands as meaningful is fundamental to the way that researchers implicitly and explicitly conceive of brands. Wendy Gordon (1999), for instance, creates an overall impression of brands as composed of often rich but rather loose sets of associations and impressions recorded in the human mind in one or other sensory form. In exploring the neuro-scientific basis for the presence of brands within the human mind, Franzen and Bouwman (2001) see brands as made up of individual items of memory organised into particular shapes or 'schemata', with these 'schemata' effectively giving meaning and distinction to the brand. These are just two variations on the 'brand as meaning system' theme. This theme is reiterated in various ways, albeit with different language and terminology, throughout the market research and branding literature.

This theme can also be seen embedded in market research practice, running through everything we do in approaching brands from top to bottom. It is present in the way that brands are modelled (see also Chapter 3), so that researchers and other brand professionals routinely talk about such things as 'brand identity', 'brand personality', 'brand values' and so on. It is present in the way that brands are researched (see also Chapters 5–8), so that researchers routinely use 'enabling' and other devices to 'tease out' what a brand 'means' to the consumer.

From the way that brands are discussed in conversation, talked about in research findings, or explored in the literature it is clear that there are some differences between researchers in the degree to which they see

brands as more or less coherent and organised identities. Some commentators address brands as if they are ordered and organised systems of meaning. Others address brands as if they are far more amorphous and loose collections of associations and sensations. Nevertheless, some common elements can be consistently found here.

- **Subjectivity:** Whether we talk of meanings, imagery, feelings, sensations, associations, ideas or residues, what we are talking about is something that is embedded in the subjective side of the consumer.
- **Complexity:** Alongside this the brand is never portrayed as a singular idea or association, image or feeling. Typically brands are conceived of as made up of sets of meanings, associations and so on. The brand is a varyingly complex and varyingly coherent set of subjective elements.
- **Associational:** A further key element within all of this is the idea that these meanings are not seen as invested in a particular entity, for example a brand name, a logo or a product. Rather, they can be evoked by all elements of the iconography, the product and the way in which it is communicated through advertising and other media. Thus a 'brand' can be seen as the various sets of meaning, ideas and feelings which come to surround 'branded' products and their assorted paraphernalia.
- **Unspoken:** Finally, it is also axiomatic that the recognition of, or attribution of meaning to, a brand is not a fully conscious process. The detailed meaning of a brand often exists implicitly at subconscious and taken-for-granted levels, it is rarely fully articulated, whether individually or collectively.

That brands are in some way 'meaningful' and that their sets or systems of meaning work to differentiate one brand from another is axiomatic amongst qualitative research practitioners. However, this in turn raises some fundamental questions about how these meanings are created, where they reside and so on. It is the purpose of the next chapter to examine some of these issues in more detail. Here it still remains to explore other key and recurrent elements in the researcher's conception of brands.

WHAT BRANDS DO

The theme of 'what brands are' is addressed in varying depth in different sources (see Franzen and Bouwman 2001 for perhaps the most in-depth account). Beyond this, much of the literature on brands and the oral tradition of practitioners actually focuses upon what brands do. Here a variety of themes, whilst not universal, do occur again and again. In practice, much of this commentary defines brands in terms of their impact upon consumer psychology, consumer culture and consumer behaviour.

Brands as Causal

Brands are important because *they make things happen* – they influence consumer behaviour. It is self-evident within the research community that brands are in some way causal. Although there may be a lack of consensus about whether this is always the case and how exactly this comes about, there is nevertheless a widespread assumption that brands are important because they influence consumer behaviour. Here a wide array of studies have demonstrated that brands or branding can influence the outcome of events in the real world.

Not only are brands seen as influencing behaviour, they also influence actual experience: ‘the subjective experience of using a brand can be different from the subjective experience of using an identical product without brand reassurance’ (Feldwick 1996: 24). Des Byrne (1993) has cited an intriguing study in which two very large groups of matched consumers were shown two different television commercials for Harvey’s Bristol Cream, one old, one new, and then given a glass of the sherry. It is fascinating that in this experiment there was a strong liking for the new television advertisement but that this also produced a 30 per cent drop in performance of the sherry in the product test: ‘detailed analysis of the results showed quite clearly that while consumers enjoyed the advertising enormously, the new commercial was giving off certain signals which undermined the quality status of the brand, a core element of its basic appeal’ (Byrne 1993: 5).

All of this seems to suggest two things quite clearly:

- **Brand communications** can affect brand perceptions.
- **Brand perceptions** can affect actual product experiences.

Similar findings reinforce these observations. France Leclerc, Bernd Schmidt and Laurette Dubé (1994) conducted a series of experiments and concluded that ‘foreign branding’ or knowledge of country of origin can influence product perceptions and product experience, particularly where a product is more ‘hedonic’ (versus utilitarian) in nature.

However, the power of brands to influence behaviour has been the cause of considerable debate. In the early 1990s European marketing was confronted with the challenge of how to deal with Eastern Europe. Tom Blackett observed that whilst many in the newly emerging Eastern Europe might aspire to the values and status of a Mercedes, most could not afford one and could only ever dream of ownership. At this level the brand could never be ‘causal’ for these ‘excluded’ consumers (Blackett 1992). However, it seems more fitting to see this as an example of the way the causal power of brands can work at a cultural level. The fact that large numbers of consumers can only dream of the Mercedes brand is a part of what makes some consumers buy Mercedes; exclusivity adds to its attraction.

More generally, the 1990s saw what might be described as an 'end of brands' debate (see, for example, Piper 1988). Mary Goodyear (1992) has observed that increasingly brand- and marketing-literate consumers can show deep knowledge of and attachment to a brand's values, but buy other brands. Here 'a number of factors seem to be operating ... consumers are becoming good at playing the branding game ... they are also good at playing the consumer game ... single minded branding was, perhaps, always based on a myth called brand loyalty' (Goodyear 1992: 38).

Others have noted that 'own labels' can serve as brands in their own right (Irvine and Fallow 1979). Own labels, retailer brands, category management and so on are all part of the shifting environment in which some brands compete but from the consumer's perspective the battle between different constellations of meaning and association remains, precisely because 'people do not perceive the structure of product fields in the same way as marketers (i.e. pure brands versus own brands versus pure generics)' (de Chernatony 1989: 250). It is not so much that 'growing retailer investment in their own labels means they are no longer perceived as "cheap and nasty" but are a major challenge to branded goods' (1989: 248), but the fact that for the consumer these alternatives work as brands in themselves.

The point here appears to be that the impact of brands upon decisions, choice and behaviour may be complex and convoluted rather than simple, direct and linear. The fact that consumers may have a powerful image of one brand and yet buy another, or on occasion switch between brands, does indicate that:

- Brands feed into behaviour but they are not the sole influence upon it.
- For a brand to have a strong and desirable image is not enough. Any brand has to battle for consumer attention and appeal in a world full of distractions and other brands.

Finally, it needs to be emphasised that although this 'causal' function of brands is typically seen both in terms of influencing or changing consumer selections, more significantly it can also be about creating or sustaining habitual (i.e. repeated) selections:

From the consumer's position, a brand allows the avoidance of choice and decision making, a brand makes the decision for you ... In a world overflowing with literally millions of petty choices to be made in everyday life brand attachments and loyalties allow a short cut through decision making. The values, meanings, associations tied together in the bundle called a brand allow consumers to trust and depend upon their selection. (Chandler 2000: 3)

Without this 'choice avoidance' function of brands everyday life would become impossibly complex, involving a constant process of decision-making that would clutter up the consumer's life and turn a trip to the supermarket into an ordeal of marathon proportions. Here we see 'choice'

as something that needs to be 'managed' by the consumer (Byfield 2001) and brands as a consumer tool in choice management.

Brand as Authentication

In the practice of brand research a frequent part of the taken-for-granted assumptions that researchers bring to the game is the implicit proposition that brands say 'this is what this is'. As a starting point, we may talk of brands as *signs of authentication and guarantee*.

Some commentators have begun their exploration of the 'what is a brand' territory with the dictionary. Here there are various references to brands as originally marks on livestock (Goodyear 1993; Hansli 2000), which served to identify ownership or point of origin. At this level a brand is seen as something similar to the American Marketing Association's 1960 definition as 'a differentiating device' (de Chernatony and Riley 1997).

Although most see brands as being far more than just an identifier, it is nevertheless important to recognise that at a basic level this is a part of what a brand is. The fact that brand devices are jealously guarded and are widely accorded legal protection – as early as the 1875 Trade Mark Protection Act in the UK (Collins and Carey 1983) – is testament to the significance of brand signs. The Coca-Cola brand device, the Levi's badge, the Nike 'swoosh' and so on, all provide the consumer with a point of recognition and authentication ... a brand makes a statement that this product is what it says it is and not something else. Thus, at the most basic level the signage of brands – trademarks, brand devices, symbols and styles – can come to be indispensable elements in how a brand is recognised (Stuart and Schlaeppli 1980).

In providing a point of recognition and authentication, it is also clear that the consumer derives a sense of what to expect from a product or service as a consequence of its branding. Paul Feldwick and Françoise Bonnal (1995) have explored these issues extensively under the themes of 'proof of authenticity' and 'promise of performance'. The Coca-Cola brand says that this cola will taste and fizz the same as it did last time. Flying British Airways will deliver a level and character of service different from a charter airline. Thus, a common theme in the brand literature and in the oral tradition of practitioners is that of the brand providing some sort of guarantee:

a credible guarantee for a product or service which distinguishes itself from similar items in the market by successfully conveying to the user the product's added value properties. (Hancock 1983: 553)

Some of those who have commentated on the rise of own label or, particularly, retailer brands can focus strongly upon this quality/guarantee dimension of the brand. Thus, at its best, an 'own label brand' can be seen

as 'a name that has distinctive connotations of an attribute or attributes, real or perceived, that are recognised and valued by a defined set of consumers' (Davis 1986: 45).

The recognition, authentication and guarantee offered by a brand may arise out of some single emblem, name or device, or out of some combination, or even out of a particular style or tone. Laforet and Saunders (1994) examine the relationship between different naming/labelling components in brand presentation; here the essential point is that often identities can be mixed and blended in different ways. The entity that motivates the consumer may be a blend of brand and the more global 'parent', as in Cadbury's Flake; or it may be a more free-standing brand name, as in Ariel or Marmite. However, here we need to be clear that the brand name, in and of itself, is nothing more than a name; it is not inherently differentiating. It is what it means or represents that is differentiating.

In providing recognition, authentication and guarantee, brand names, brand devices and so on, are not doing something radically new. The use of icons as a means of identification and as a means of conveying some sort of meaning and association has a long heritage. There are many parallels here with heraldic devices, the seals of medieval craft guilds and so on. All of these are identifying signs that can also convey a rich raft of other meanings and associations. The point here is that whilst the brand device may be an identifier, it is not the brand itself ... the brand is something larger, more encompassing and more abstract than this.

Brands as Differentiators

Beyond the idea of brands as authentication devices and identifiers, a virtually universal theme amongst commentaries upon brands is the idea that brands are somehow differentiating – a brand sets itself apart from others. In the branding literature this is often seen as a key element of what brands are;

A brand has one strategic purpose and that is to differentiate itself from competitors. (Gordon 1999: 324)

This is a common theme amongst many commentators. More significantly, the idea of the brand as a differentiating factor is a virtually universal assumption in the industry. A key item in the objectives of virtually every piece of brand research is the quest to establish how this or that brand is *set apart from others*.

Alongside this notion of the brand as differentiating, we also often encounter the implicit assumption, or the overt proposition, that the brand can be seen as more than just the product that it is linked to. Here a clear line is implicitly or explicitly drawn between 'the product', i.e. the material object or service and its performance, on the one hand, and the brand on the other.

The brand appears in these accounts as an added dimension over and above the product, and over and above its performance. The brand incorporates these but is more than them. 'The brand' is a way of conceptualising the associations, impressions, feelings, thoughts and ideas that surround a product. The brand is about something more than functional performance. Here differentiation is not simply about product difference, although this may play a role. Differentiation is about emotional orientation and relationship, it is about a response to the values associated with the brand.

In this connection, various studies have shown that the presence of a recognised and known brand name can influence a customer's perception of a product, typically enhancing perceptions, although not always (see, for example, Holtius and Patlschik 1983). Thus, distinction or uniqueness in the brand sense is not just about practical characteristics, although it may be rooted in these, it is about more emotive elements. It is, for example, about Andrex promising a special kind of softness combined with playfulness that is difficult for any other toilet roll to imitate (Biel 1997).

The idea that it is the brand, rather than the product, that provides differentiation is given further credence by the fact that in many markets products are often 'updated' whilst brand names and much of the identity that the name brings with it remain constant. 'New and improved' Ariel or Fairy allows consumers the reassurance of remaining with what they know and feel comfortable with, whilst at the same time feeling that any technical advances that have been introduced by competitive products have been incorporated into their own brand. As Udo Reuter has observed:

The brand is the only stable and valid orientation criterion for buyers and consumers ... The brand means continuity despite the necessary permanent change of products and product ranges. (Reuter 1993)

Often this sense of differentiation beyond the level of functional performance or delivery is seen as increasingly important. Many have observed that in the modern context actual performance differentiators between products are of declining significance (Hansli 2000; Reuter 1993). Technological advance and particularly the pace of advance means that in many markets today's innovation is tomorrow's commonplace so that product quality is more and more 'a given' in many areas. With less time available to the consumer and fewer real differences in product actually discernible, 'branding will increasingly be more influential than technology in maintaining differentiation' (Lannon 1993: 22). In parallel to this technical feature it is also true that, in many markets, differences in product performance are hard to identify or assess. In this scenario it is the softer side of brands (rather than products) that increasingly exists as a basis for differentiation. Even in markets where real and discernible differences between products can be seen, e.g. automotive or pharmaceuticals,

the consumer's ability to instantly 'feel' or intuit differences at an emotional level is a vital factor in providing 'an edge' to one brand over another.

The proposition that brands are more than products should not blind us to the fact that the performance dimension matters. It is fallacious to imagine that 'branding' can compensate for a poorly performing product. Product performance cannot be ignored, although the significance and character of the performance dimension may change. In the pharmaceutical territory the gastric drug Zantac was at one time one of the biggest value brands in the world, its success transforming the drug company Glaxo into an international pharmaceutical giant. Its success was built at a product level; it was the second in a new class of drug called 'H2 antagonists' which, by effectively controlling production of acid in the stomach, dramatically reduced the severity of ulcer disease and other gastric problems. However, Zantac was not the only H2 antagonist drug. Tagamet, the first H2 drug on the market, was virtually identical and was also lower priced. Other H2 competitors also arrived in the market with virtually identical, if not superior, profiles but failed to impact significantly on Zantac's market share. In this scenario we have to see Zantac's success as also rooted in its marketing – a function of the right 'branding' in the right place at the right time. The power of the Zantac brand in doctors' minds transformed the benefits of the product into an outstanding commercial success story.

Brands as Unique Coherence

Implicit in the idea of a brand as a differentiating set of meanings is the proposition that brands are unique – any brand is different from any other. Coca-Cola enjoys a different image from Pepsi. Mercedes possesses a different emotional feel for the consumer than BMW.

Again there are underlying assumptions here that run through much of what practitioners say and write. Here a core assumption is that brands are multi-dimensional and multi-vocal, i.e. made up of many different meanings, associations and so on, and that these express themselves to the consumer in a variety of different ways. 'Brands are a highly complex conglomerate of technological, rational, emotional, social and cultural contents and signals' (Reuter 1993). From their comprehensive review of neuroscientific knowledge, Giep Franzen and Margot Bouwman (2001) leave an overall picture of brands as made up of individual 'bits' of memory which are organised into particular shapes by sets of 'schemata'. Any brand is different from another because it is composed in the individual consumer's mind of a distinctive set of associations with these held together or organised in a unique way (see also Chapter 2).

Beyond this, brands are not only widely seen as uniquely different from one another, they are also seen as subject to change over time (see Chapters 2 and 3). Changing consumer perceptions, needs and so on can in turn change elements within any brand as it appears in the real world:

A 'Brand' is certainly not a simple, easy [sic] understandable, rationally oriented phenomenon that fulfils cold and functional needs of consumers. We have to consider a brand as a living being with a soul, an identity, and a personality, as every human being has. Only then will we be able to understand and to manage the brand in its global gestalt, as it will be considered and identified by its consumers. (Verlinden 1993: 5)

Franz Hansli has observed that many companies with 'one big brand' have often struggled and failed to create a second big brand (Hansli 2000). Here the problem is the inevitable impulse to try to duplicate or copy the first experience when that first big brand was the product of a particular and unique historical interaction. Similarly, it has been noted that brands often appear to be heavily rooted in the cultural systems of the company that created them and that, in consequence, product ranges within companies often exist within clearly defined parameters that are difficult to escape from even if the desire exists (personal communication).

Thus, we can conclude that:

a brand is more than the sum of its parts, more than just the product itself, or its packaging, or its logo, these are all part of the brand paraphernalia that may help to contribute to what the brand is, but they are not it in its entirety. (Chandler 2000: 3)

Brands as Cultural Icons

A key aspect of brands that is widely identified or recognised, but more rarely explored in detail, is the notion that brands are cultural in nature. Again and again in the literature, and in their everyday practice, researchers make reference to culture and consumer culture.

This cultural dimension is most easily illustrated by returning to the examples of brands as causal factors cited in the previous section. It is the fact that the dissonant communication about Harvey's Bristol Cream sherry was experienced by many in the same way that produced a collective (cultural) shift in actual product experiences. It is the fact that attitudes to foreign countries are culturally available and culturally shared that means that responses to different levels of 'foreign branding' will exhibit themselves at a collective (cultural) level. If, as Mary Goodyear observes, 'consumers are becoming good at playing the branding game' (1993: 38), then this is an event of a sociological nature precisely because whatever consumers share or exchange with one another in terms of brand or branding knowledge is a cultural exchange.

The cultural/sociological nature of the brand is implicit in a large majority of the different accounts of brands and branding. Insofar as brands exist independently of logos or products, they exist at a cultural level. Whilst significant areas of the meaning of a brand may be shared by individual members of a culture or sub-culture, the brand does not cease

to exist if some members do not share in all of the elements that make up the brand. The fact that all Mercedes drivers do not 'buy into' some of the status dimensions of the brand does not negate this element in the brand's make up; within overall motoring culture Mercedes remains a more status-giving brand.

Occasionally there is overt recognition of this cultural dimension of brands:

Brands flourish in cultures which have a strong collective experience; indeed they are vessels or mirrors through which a culture can collectively experience and celebrate meaning and individual identity. (Baker 1987: 849; see also Chandler and Owen 1989; Lannon and Cooper 1983)

Thus, fundamental to the nature of the brand, although rarely developed in accounts of brands and branding, is the collective and shared character of the brand. Brands can be seen as social facts (Durkheim 1966). They have significance insofar as they are in some way shared and generate multiple and collective responses. They do not exist in any absolutely concrete form and yet they make things happen, not only on an individual basis, but on a collective basis; and not only because of individual meanings, but because of collectively shared meanings. They exert their force on consumer buying patterns, loyalty patterns or the adoption of the new.

Brands and Needs

A further key element in the branding literature, and often a taken-for-granted component in the issues explored in actual brand research, is the idea that brands in some way or other address consumer 'needs'. Again some link between brands and consumer needs is virtually axiomatic in the practice of research. The 'exploration' of consumer needs in a particular market and the examination of how, and how far, existing brands address those needs is a virtually standard 'cut and paste' component of any brand-orientated research brief.

This link between brands and consumer needs finds expression in a variety of ways. Gill Aitchison (1995) has suggested that successful global brands (and presumably more localised ones too) are successful because they satisfy at least one of three categories of key human needs:

- **Physiological needs:** e.g. Coca-Cola satisfies needs of thirst and refreshment.
- **Personal utility needs:** e.g. Wash and Go satisfies the need for quick and effective shampoo and conditioning.
- **Self-worth needs:** e.g. Benetton satisfies the need to be noticed and the wish to make a positive personal statement.

Here 'needs' range from the practical and physiological to those which are more emotional and subjective in character. Elsewhere we often encounter a stronger focus on needs that are more psychological and emotional than physiological. Mike Imms (2000b), for example, has modified and adapted Mary Goodyear's 'Brand Consumerisation Spectrum' (Goodyear 1993), creating a ladder of brands according to the core character of consumers' relationship with the brand. Here brands are seen as (potentially) evolving through different types of relationship. From brand as *reference* ('this brand makes the kind of product I want'), we pass through brand as *personality*, *icon* and *company* to the brand as *policy* ('I support this brand because we share value systems').

Whilst we might want to take issue with the evolutionary implication that brands will or should progress to some 'higher stage', some points here are fundamental. Most notable is the proposition that consumers have relationships with brands, that in part these relationships are about need fulfilment *and* that the nature of these relationships can, does and will vary. Different brands do different things for different people in different ways; nevertheless they still do things.

Thus, propositions about needs manifest themselves in a variety of different ways, some more and some less overt. Nevertheless, they are commonplace:

Brands achieve their individual success because they resonate with some underlying consumer need. They continue to be successful because they continue to in some way satisfy that need. Brands may meet needs in terms of functional performance or end benefit, they may fit in with patterns of ritual behaviour and fulfil needs at this level or they may address needs that are more emotional either directly or as a surrogate or through some displacement mechanism. (Chandler 2000: 3)

Or, the relationship with the brand

revolves around the ability of the brand to satisfy the consumers' physical and psychological needs by offering the right mix of functional attributes and symbolic values. (Hankinson and Cowking 1996: 2).

Chris Griffiths (1992) has explored the reasons for the success and failure of brands moving into new markets. 'Branding', Griffiths stresses, reflects a subtly distinctive stance which recognises the limitations imposed by products. It focuses on the process by which personalities are developed and adapted around products. Griffiths' key point is that a brand has to start with a product and if there is no kind of need for that product (overt or latent) as can be the case in some mature markets, no amount of marketing will create a successful brand. Notably Griffiths explores the failure of Lila Pause, one of Europe's most successful chocolate bars, to achieve any real success in the UK in spite of heavyweight

marketing. Griffiths attributes failure here not to any shortcoming of marketing but to a more fundamental failure to recognise that Lila Pause offered to serve no new need or serve any existing need better in an already overcrowded UK chocolate market. Whether or not we agree with Griffiths' analysis that the product failed through lack of needs, the point is well made that a brand must address needs at some level in some way.

Brands and Orientation

A less prominent but highly significant theme in relation to brands is the proposition that brands can be bound up with personal identity in some way.

Most often and most obviously this theme appears in some variant of the 'badging' principle – that consumers can use particular brands as a way of saying or expressing something about themselves. Thus, for example, the wearing of one type of designer label rather than another can make a particular statement about the kind of person 'I am' (Aitchison 1995). Peter Cooper (1979) has, for example, noted how brands are often used as expressive gestures or as a kind of incantation in the rituals of everyday life. Alternatively, in many Eastern cultures conspicuous consumption of Western brands may be less about embracing Western values or philosophies and more about the expression of traditional Eastern status values (Cooper 1997). The overall point here is that whilst what is expressed may vary widely, brands can be used to communicate to others about 'who I am' (Collins and Carey 1983).

From this perspective, the Fairy Liquid in my kitchen tells others something about the kind of kitchen I keep; the Range Rover I drive tells others about the kind of driver I am; wearing Gucci or Prada makes a different statement from Gap or Next; the doctor who likes to prescribe the latest generation migraine therapy sends messages about himself to his colleagues and patients.

When we think about the expression of identity we tend to think most readily about self-expression to others – '*expressive identity*'. However, identity can be conceived in a broader way than this. Identity is also about achieving and affirming an understanding of self, an understanding of what the world around us is, how we relate to it and our feelings about it. In this connection there are occasional references to brands as being a part of the understanding of '*introspective identity*' – the brand tells me something about 'who I am':

Human beings need objects they 'adopt' in a psychological sense, and which help them to define themselves. (Reuter 1993: 10)

From this perspective, the Fairy Liquid in my kitchen affirms to myself the kind of kitchen I keep, the Range Rover I drive tells me something about the

kind of driver I am, the doctor who likes to prescribe the latest generation migraine therapy is also re-stating to himself just what kind of doctor he is.

Beyond this role in defining or delineating aspects of identity to others and to self, there is occasionally reference to brands as helping to define identity in terms of the *world around us*.

What makes brands powerful is that they give consumers a way of understanding and seeing the world, they provide a particular prism through which the world is refracted. The prism that the brand provides becomes incorporated into the way the consumer implicitly views things. (Chandler 2000: 3)

Here the brand appears as what Franz Hansli has described as an 'orientation system'; the meanings and associations embedded in the brand help consumers to orient themselves to parts of the world around them (Hansli, personal communication). Brands can be seen as a part of the means whereby consumers create 'meaning out of chaos' (Duckworth 1996) From this perspective, the Fairy Liquid in my kitchen tells me that quality and economy are not the same thing, the Range Rover I drive tells me that safety and solidity are more important than speed, the latest generation migraine therapy tells the doctor that migraine is a complex and debilitating condition that should be taken seriously.

In the introduction to this book we talked about the wider social themes of loss of social cohesion and security in modern society. Occasionally, the more adventurous branding literature suggests that the increasing emergence of the brand phenomenon somehow fills this emotional or psychological vacuum. Cooper and Patterson (2000), for example, present a psychological variant of this proposition when they see the trickster in branding or advertising as a way of re-connecting with 'our primitive selves', which have been suppressed and overlaid by rationality.

Brands as Contract

Beyond the idea of brands being collections or bundles of values and meanings, some commentators introduce additional 'spins' on the brand theme, which can greatly enhance our vision of brands. A number of the more interesting propositions involve reflection upon the nature of the relationship with the consumer. For example, Paul Feldwick (1996) talks about successful brands such as Apple, the Body Shop, Häagen-Dazs, not only representing clear values but also 'presenting a coherent purpose' to the consumer. Here there is an idea of an underlying ideology or a *mission* at the heart of what the brand is. The implication is that to some degree the consumer buys into that central purpose; in the act of purchasing the consumer funds the mission.

There is an obvious further implication that if the brand does not remain true to its mission or if consumers change their mind about the

significance of the mission then the 'deal' may be off. Additionally, evolving social trends may impact on this, making the implicit deal between brand and consumer less relevant over time in a changing social environment (Martin Callingham, personal communication).

Elsewhere, Jean-Noel Kapferer has presented the notion of the brand as a *contract* (Kapferer 1997). Here there is an implied agreement between manufacturer and consumer. In this 'contract' the consumer implicitly infers some kind of 'offer' or a set of 'terms and conditions' to which they 'agree' when buying into the brand. What is interesting here is that there need not be much or any common ground between what the provider in reality feels they are offering and what the consumer 'buys into'. The brand provider may 'make suggestions' as to what 'the contract' involves, but ultimately it is the consumer who fixes the 'terms and conditions'.

This theme of the brand as involving some kind of implicit contract, at least from the consumer's perspective, is one which surfaces periodically. Nicholas Staveley (1987) has talked about the idea of the brand as a kind of 'compact' with the consumer. Staveley sees this compact as a 'token of fidelity' which provides a sense of 'certitude and consistency'.

One illustration of this fundamental point is the case of 'Strand' cigarettes, probably the most quoted story in the history of UK advertising and research. The brand was launched with the advertising strapline 'You're never alone with a Strand' and was a resounding flop – or so the story goes. Here the failure can be understood in terms of consumer rejection of an implied contract in which smoking a Strand meant being isolated and alone.

Martin Callingham has provided a further illustration in the demise of OMO within the UK detergents market. For many years OMO was one of the leading brands in this marketplace. The brand was effectively 'killed' by an incautious advertising campaign which focused upon the central theme of 'understains'. This can be seen as an example of an effective 'breach of contract' by the manufacturer through 'hanging the consumer's dirty washing out in public' (personal communication). Interestingly, OMO continues to be a highly successful brand in other European countries.

Or alternatively, to take one of Kapferer's examples:

the current problems of Club Med ... also find their source in the forsaking of the founding principles of the brand ... the inspired strength of Club Méditerranée was forgotten when the brand was restructured to make it international and re-named Club Med ... Club Med has become a vacation club and no longer promotes a particular lifestyle. (Kapferer 1997: 177)

Drawing these ideas of mission and contract directly together:

Strong brands have a mission perceived by the consumer. This mission has the following facets. It conveys how the brand views the world and the

consumers' needs, but also expresses the vision which the brand has of a better world. It clearly indicates what the brand strives to achieve, contract with the consumer. The consumer can blindly rely on the fact that all products of this brand will score highly on the main dimensions of the brand mission. (Reuter 1993: 17)

What is important about this focus on 'compact' or 'contract' and brands is that it brings in the notion of brands as a *currency in an exchange relationship*. Here we begin to see some re-introduction of more anthropological themes into the idea of what brands are and are about. In 'buying into' a brand consumers are entering into a 'trade' in which there are expectations (an implicit contract) about what they will get out of the exchange in terms of any number of a variety of 'benefits'; – practical, emotional, symbolic and so on.

Brands as Charismatic

Udo Reuter has introduced the idea of 'charisma' into the brand literature:

Charisma and fascination: Strong brands have got 'the certain something' that defies any rational comparison with other brands. They fascinate as a 'personality' – irrespective of whether one likes them or not. (Reuter 1993: 11)

Whilst this notion is by no means as common as others in the brand literature, there are other interesting themes that are similar. On occasion we can see a parallel theme in the idea of brands or branding as somehow 'magic'. Here there is something that defies the rational, that involves some 'sleight of hand' whereby an object becomes transformed into more than it actually is.

Within these themes we see the idea that a brand possesses (or should possess) an aura of celebrity in contrast with, for example, other lesser or own label rivals. This is a very difficult element to clearly tie down, but put very simply there is something shinier and more attractive about a brand. The concept of charisma or brands as charismatic here may also be useful if we examine how the charisma concept has been used elsewhere. Max Weber wrote extensively on the concept of charisma, particularly as an aspect of leadership, seeing charisma as a mechanism for managing or reconciling contradictions or conflicting forces. The charismatic leader conjures up faith and zealotry, appearing to provide new ways of looking at the world through inspiration rather than a rationally organised system of understanding (see, for example, Talcott Parsons 1954). What is interesting here is that it would not be difficult to substitute the concept of a brand into this charismatic equation.

What all of this seems to suggest is that on occasion brands can have an element of celebrity or magic about them – charisma. In the consumer's

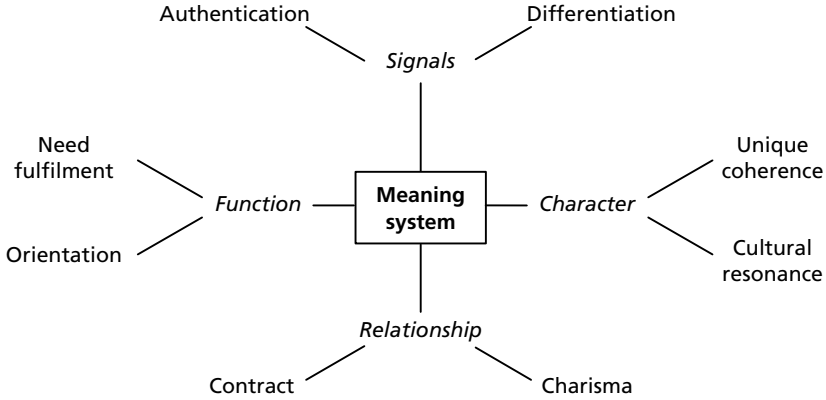


FIGURE 1.1 *What brands do*

eye, even if only for a passing moment, they can have something special about them. That something special allows consumers to make a leap of faith. Whether the leap of faith is that others will never smell odours on their clothes with Radion or that their old age will be secure and happy with Scottish Widows, brands cast a spell in the way that means ‘problems’ that can perhaps never be resolved are at least held at bay.

CONCLUSION: THE KEY DIMENSIONS OF BRANDS

In reviewing the way that researchers and others talk and write about brands, the above themes are prominent. At one extreme, some variation on the ‘meaning system’ theme is virtually always present. At the other extreme, propositions of ‘brand as contract’ or ‘charismatic’ are less common, but appear to offer something important and original. It is possible to introduce more order into these themes by clustering them and portraying them diagrammatically, as in Figure 1.1.

At its heart a brand can be seen as a meaning system. This ‘meaning’ may be a mixture of implicit and explicit; and it may be present in a wide range of forms from coherent ideas to loose sensory, visual or verbal associations. In addition, the ‘system’ in which these meanings exist may be more or less coherent, organised and systematic. Moreover, these meanings are enmeshed in processes through which brands influence consumer behaviour, they make things happen, they are causal.

The various other themes that recur in talking about brands relate more to what brands do than what they are. Here we see ideas of brands

working as signals, on the one hand identifying and authenticating a product or service, and simultaneously differentiating it from others. By providing identifying signals, through its trademarks, packaging and so on, a brand provides the consumer with some kind of guarantee that it is the genuine article. This in turn gives the consumer a sense of certainty about what the product will deliver and helps generate consumer trust and confidence.

Alongside this a brand serves to signal differentiation from its competitors, setting it apart from others. Crucially, this differentiation may relate more to the intangible elements of the brand than its functional performance, especially in markets where actual performance differences are low or hard to assess. Moreover, it seems self-evident that where brands are well differentiated (and easily identifiable) at a non-functional level, through strong branding, they will be less vulnerable than those brands whose difference is built more on product performance.

Other themes in the overall branding discourse relate more to the character of brands. Here the brand as a 'meaning system' is seen as possessing a unique make-up; the whole constellation of associations linked to the brand is unique as a collection and is 'shaped' or held together in a unique way. The idea that the brand presents a unique coherence is developed in a significant direction by the proposition that it is at the same time culturally shared. In this respect what brands do is give a sense of coherence to otherwise potentially 'shapeless' items of 'knowledge' or 'memory' and they do this at both an individual and a cultural level.

Beyond these 'character' elements of brands, other key aspects of what brands do relate more to the 'psychological' functions that brands can perform. At a functional level the brand 'meaning system' is seen as, on the one hand, addressing some of consumers' practical and emotional needs. On the other hand, it is also seen as being bound up in the way that consumers see the world and identify and express themselves in it. Desirable brands, that is those brands that best fulfil consumers' needs and/or provide them with the means to understand and express their identity and interpret the world around them, are more likely to be successful than those that do not or do so inadequately.

Other key elements in this overall discourse about what brands do focus more upon aspects of the relationship between the brand and the consumer. Here again we see two major dimensions: that the brand is part of an exchange relationship, in which there is an implicit contract or 'deal' between the consumer and brand. Simultaneously, we see the idea that the brand is involved in a problem-solving relationship in which the brand presents a charismatic face to the consumer, providing a sense that choices, difficulties, concerns and so on have successfully been managed by the brand.

KEY POINTS

Reviewing how different commentators have talked about brands and how different researchers think about brands, it is interesting that there is far more common ground than may at first be visible.

- Brands influence consumer behaviour.
- At their heart brands are seen as representing some kind of meaning system.
- Brand meaning systems are unique in any individual case and exist at a culturally shared level.
- The brand sends signals to the consumer, acting as an identifier and serving to differentiate from other brands or objects.
- Brands perform key functions in terms of addressing needs and developing and expressing identity.
- Consumers have relationships with brands which, importantly, imply some 'deal' or contract, often resolving issues or problems through the often 'charismatic' effect they exert.

2

Brands and the Human Dimension

In this chapter we explore how brands exist. In order to do this we review current understandings relevant to the world of the consumer from the sciences of the mind and cultural sciences. From this we explore how brands exist in everyday life and the 'natural history of a brand'; we look at the genesis and evolution of brands within consumer culture.

THE WHERE AND HOW OF BRANDS

The discussion of 'what brands are' in Chapter 1 attempts both to describe and theorise about brands. It does this by taking their existence as a given. However, in order to have any inkling about branding and brand research we need to place the existence of brands under the microscope.

Chapter 1 talked about brands as cultural icons, as having meanings and associations for consumers. But what does all this mean? Here we start to move away from the 'What is ...?' type of question and start posing a new range of questions that is more about the 'Where?' and 'How?' of brands. In order to address these questions, we need to step back from the specific issues of brands and branding and focus upon a new problematic; the nature of the human mind and the nature of culture. If brands are 'meaningful' in some way then we need to understand how such meaning exists, how and where it comes about. If brands exist as cultural icons, then we need to understand how brands can exist at a cultural level, how culture is generated, sustained and changed.

Here we need to explore the underlying theories and assumptions about mind and culture which underpin qualitative market research generally, and more specifically as it pertains to brand research. These we will deal with shortly. However, again we are confronted with the absence of a theory as to how qualitative market research can access and understand the human mind and human culture: there is no body of theoretical work and principles that all qualitative researchers recognise as the foundation for what they do. At this level many researchers simply 'do research' without conscious reference to theory or theorists.

Nevertheless some theory (or theories) that can help us formulate an understanding of how qualitative research works does exist at other levels.

- There is a body of work (albeit somewhat dispersed) made up of the various **writings of practitioners**. Here practitioners have tried to give some explanation and grounding for what they do. This process has often involved reaching out to academic disciplines, primarily psychology, but also anthropology, sociology, linguistics and so on.
- At another level, there is the **oral tradition** of qualitative research theory that is handed down from 'senior' to 'junior' practitioners in the processes of training and simply working together. This oral tradition is passed on in a 'bits and pieces' fashion and tends to be more practical in focus, for example: explaining that 'respondents are not always capable of articulating feelings'. However, not far below the surface of such explanations there are elements of a more theoretical web.
- At yet another level, there is what we might call the **assumptive theory** of qualitative market research. This 'body of theory' is made up of the collective body of assumptions that are implied by the way that researchers practise research. Pre-meditated and spontaneous 'decisions' about, for example, whether to use group-based or individual-based 'interviewing', using indirect versus direct questioning, using 'projective' techniques and so on, all imply a set of underlying theoretical assumptions even if these are never formally recognised by the practitioner.

Although this knowledge of qualitative research exists at different levels, it can largely be accessed via the first level, since practitioners' writings are in part an attempt to formalise both the oral tradition and assumptive theory. However, it is interesting to note that in exploring the qualitative market research literature to elucidate a theory or theories of mind and culture, there is substantially more about mind than there is about culture. This is something that we have attempted to rectify later in this chapter.

THE THEORY OF MIND

From its earliest times, UK qualitative market research has been grounded in psychological theory. As has often been noted, the early pioneers of qualitative research often came from psychological backgrounds. Historically, the key reference points for theory were in psychology:

The dominant concepts and theories behind qualitative market research arise directly from the discipline of psychology, specifically post-Freudian, humanistic psychology ... The humanistic principle that people ... have within them everything they need to self-direct means that the purpose of the interview is to enable them to express and explain themselves. (Imms 2000c: 5–6 see also, for example, Gordon 1999)

Over time, academic psychology has been a rich source for qualitative research theory; theories of the subconscious and unconscious mind,

Humanistic psychology and more latterly recent advances in neuroscience arising out of massive research investment over the past two decades has led to a growing understanding of how the brain processes and stores information. Collectively, this work provides a comprehensive base from which we can talk about how brands exist in the human mind.

The original grounding of qualitative market research in psychological disciplines was one of the driving forces behind the growth of more creative approaches to qualitative research and the adoption of a wide range of 'enabling' and 'projective' techniques. These were designed to tap into the subconscious and unconscious mind and reveal or 'unlock' what is suppressed or hidden. Underlying this approach was the supposition that brands worked by tapping into fundamental psychological needs and, therefore, that to understand the appeal of a brand it was necessary to reveal the inner workings of the human subconscious.

The 'Johari Window' is a heuristic device that is often referred to or used to portray the existence of different levels of 'mind' with differing levels of accessibility. Originally the Johari Window was developed as a model for describing and managing interpersonal relations (see, for example, Goffman 1959; Luft and Ingham 1955). This model has been adapted and is widely referenced in qualitative research commentary (see, for example, Gordon 1999; Imms 2000c and Book 1 of this series) to illustrate the way in which consumer 'knowledge' falls into different categories, some of which are easier to access than others. Although there are variations in the way this device is employed, its basic propositions are that:

- There are some things which people 'know' and are happy to talk about.
- There are some things which people 'know' but try to hide.
- There are some things which people do not consciously 'know', but would be happy to talk about if they did.
- There are some things which people do not know and would not reveal if they were known.

The Johari Window is interesting because it serves as a means of expressing in summary form some of the dominant assumptions that have underpinned much qualitative research practice over recent decades. These core theoretical assumptions can be easily extrapolated from the Johari Window:

- That there are levels of 'mind' that are conscious and levels of 'mind' that are not, i.e. subconscious and/or unconscious.
- That there are areas of conscious mind that people will not easily or willingly reveal.
- That sensitive interviewing can encourage people to divulge these things.
- That, beyond simple 'divulgence', some aspects of the subconscious or unconscious mind can be brought to the surface.

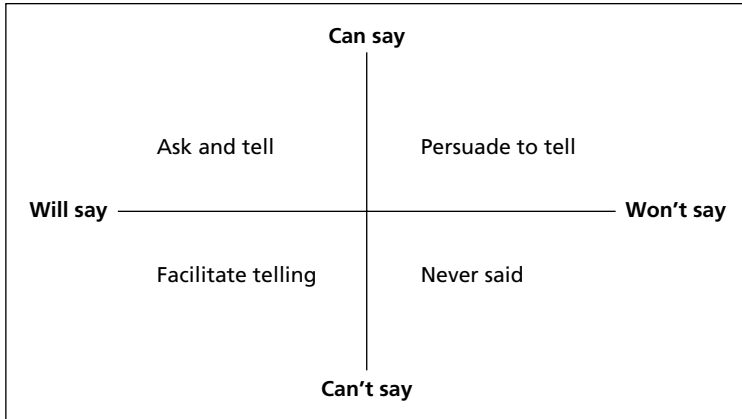


FIGURE 2.1 *Johari Window*

In recent years there has been a considerable growth in understanding of how mind and memory work, how communications are processed by the brain and so on. All of this work is of considerable value in supplementing longer-standing ideas about the existence of the subconscious and/or unconscious mind and providing a theoretical platform and neuroscientific underpinning from which we can appreciate how 'knowledge' about brands exists in the human mind. More recent models and understanding of how the human mind works, rooted in dramatic advances in neuroscience, have led to profound shifts in how the 'unconscious' mind is seen. Crucially this work suggests that much of what lies below conscious levels is not 'repressed' or 'hidden' but is simply the product of the *practical requirement* to conduct many human functions on 'auto pilot' in order not to clutter up our lives with relatively trivial decision-making. Of more practical importance, it also provides significant insights into the ways in which we should approach the business of identifying what brands mean to the consumer.

The theme of the 'invisibility' (Chandler and Owen 1998) of much that drives or influences human behaviour has been recurrent in market research literature (see, for example, Cooper and Branthwaite 1977; Dichter 1960). More recently, Alan Branthwaite and Alan Swindells (1995a, 1995b) developed new approaches to advertising interviewing arising out of a recognition that the human brain processes 'information' in different ways. Drawing upon contemporary psychological understanding, they proposed that the bulk of what is experienced in everyday life is 'processed' episodically; registered and recorded more or less as it happens but not actively thought about or integrated with other 'information'. Only a small proportion of that everyday experience is processed in a more deliberative way and 'semantically processed' by being thought about, analysed and perhaps integrated with existing ideas. At the centre of the

Branthwaite and Swindells proposition was the idea that most advertising 'works' at the level of 'episodic processing' as streams of images and sensations rather than 'worked through' information, ideas or propositions.

Robert Heath and Jon Howard-Spink (2000) develop these kinds of theme further in talking about 'high involvement processing', 'low involvement processing' and 'pre-attentive processing'. Here they identify different levels of learning ranging from that which involves high levels of attention, through that which is less involved, more instinctive and 'switched off', to that which is subconscious, with the subject unaware that it is happening at all. Again these processes are seen as constantly occurring. Memory stores all of this information, sometimes short-term and sometimes long-term, in networks of connections. As for advertising and brands: 'Low involvement processing is ... the glue that holds the entire world of brands together' (2000: 340).

At a broader level, Magne Supphellen (2000) has conducted a review of key psychological and market research literature out of which some further core propositions emerge:

- The majority of stimuli that reach the human brain are visual, not verbal, in nature (Kosslyn et al. 1990).
- The traditional opposition of emotion and reason is inappropriate (Issen 1993). Human 'decision-making' involves both reason and emotion in the same moment (Kahnemann 1994).
- Memory associations often occur in clusters and some of these will only be recalled if triggered by, for example, certain contexts or situations (Anderson 1983).
- Most human communication is non-verbal (Patterson 1991).
- The balance of verbal to visual is not fixed, some people work or think in more visual terms while others may be more verbal (Bandler and Grinder 1979; Gordon and Langmaid 1988).

Much of this helps to make sense of the everyday experiences of market researchers going about their business. It is interesting that the world of market research can provide its own evidence of these propositions. In the late 1980s Roy Langmaid and Wendy Gordon (1988) showed that subjects under hypnosis or in an altered state of consciousness were able to recall brand advertisements (and what they 'meant' or implied) of which they had no recall at a conscious level. Again we see, in quite a graphic way, the presence of brands in layers of the mind beneath that of consciousness.

Magne Supphellen (2000) further looks at these more general observations about the nature of mind and sees how these relate more directly to the world of brands:

- Brand associations are mostly unconscious (Plutchik 1993).
- Brand associations often exist in the mind in the form of metaphors (Zaltman 1997).

- The majority of brand associations are visual rather than verbal (Zaltman 1997).
- Brand associations are also stored in the form of sensory impressions like smell, taste and sound (Marks 1996).
- Brand associations also exist in the form of emotional responses (Fiske and Taylor 1995).

What is important in all of this recent work is that it provides us with a multi-dimensional picture of the human mind in which only a small component of 'what is going on' is in the form of conscious thought. This overall picture is useful in understanding what goes on in the often rather mundane and ordinary world of the consumer. Crucially, it allows us to appreciate that the world of 'the unconscious mind' is not always one of deep passions and repressed feelings, but more often is simply about organising what it encounters in the world and finding ways to get by. What we see here are 'pictures of mind' that tell us about how the mind deals with the vast array of 'information' that it encounters on an every-day basis, some of it relating to brands, much of it relating to other things that may be more or less important. In this picture of mind, information is constantly being sifted, stored, parked and dumped, at varying levels of consciousness. In this picture of mind some of this processing is more 'active' and conscious, but far more of this processing is more 'passive' in its nature, it is not 'thought through' in the way that we commonsensically conceive of the term 'thinking'. Equally important to the qualitative enterprise is the idea that much of this occurs in ways that are 'invisible' to the consumer themselves. The individual is not consciously aware of most of what they have actually processed.

Most recently Giep Franzen and Margot Bouwman (2001) have conducted an impressive review of psychological and neuroscientific knowledge to create a 'state of the art understanding' of the 'mental world of brands'. In summary, they picture brands as living in the mental world in the form of an array of items of memory held together and shaped by 'schemata'. In this mental world of brands, items of brand memory are usually acquired in ways that are not conscious; in turn, brand 'decisions' are by definition not fully conscious decisions. This mental world is also one in which what we traditionally see as 'emotion' is the dominant influence on decision outcomes, since it is 'emotional' mechanisms which are used to sift and sort external stimuli, 'emotional' mechanisms which are used to organise items of 'knowledge' and 'emotional' mechanisms which are used to leap gaps in 'knowledge' and come to decisions, choices or selections. The contribution that Franzen and Bouwman have made lies in part in the exhaustive character of their work, but it is also in the unequivocal demonstration that the central pillars of this modern understanding of the mental world of brands is grounded in neuroscientific fact rather than purely theoretical speculation.

As a consequence of the growing knowledge of how the mind works one thing becomes clear. The traditional 'rational versus emotional'

opposition that is often used to describe different realms of behavioural influence is inadequate, inappropriate and often misleading. Crucially, this opposition carries with it the implication that what happens outside the level of the rational and conscious is somehow irrational and undesirable, driven by deep unbridled passions. However, this does not reflect what most researchers encounter most of the time in their everyday practice of research. Perhaps it would be more valuable here to talk about qualitative research as needing to address *both* the visible and invisible layers of human mind and culture.

Here we have a picture in which the mind selects and stores much information in ways that are not conscious. In its turn this 'theory of mind' needs to be combined with a theory of culture, that sees perception as an interactive or transactional process. 'The transactional view ... regards perception as continuously and inextricably enmeshed by the enterprise of living'; every human being is a product – a constantly changing product – of the situations through which he or she moves. (Toch and MacLean 1970: 126).

THE THEORY OF CULTURE

From its earliest times, qualitative market research has made reference to culture and the importance of the cultural dimension. Again and again, both in the market research literature and in everyday market research practice, we see and hear reference to culture, cultural difference, sub-culture and so on.

The humanistic movement asserts that the individual is a function of his or her own personality and sociocultural context. (Imms 2000c: 6)

This reference to the cultural dimension is commonplace. For example, it is widely accepted that how sophisticated (or not) consumers are in dealing with brands will vary both within and between cultures: 'Different parts of the world are on different steps of the evolutionary ladder of consumerism' (Byfield and Caller 1996: 21).

Equally, the way in which consumers deal with brands can vary within and between cultures. This theme of the difficulties of global branding is taken up by Peter Cooper, who contrasts the individualism of 'the West' with the collectivism of 'the East'. Taking up Western brands may be a conspicuous display of success, but it does not mean Western values have been adopted (Cooper 1997).

Most of us have a common-sense view of what culture is: patterns of meanings, ideas, values and so on that are shared by more or less discernible groups or clusters of people. When someone talks about 'mainstream cultural values' or a particular 'criminal sub-culture', we have some sense of what they are referring to, albeit that this may not be clearly

defined in either their minds or our own minds. Typically this is what happens when researchers talk about brands and culture; an instinctive recognition of something that is real and important but hard to clearly identify or define. For a working theory of brands we need a working theory of culture to run in parallel with our theory of mind.

A number of academic disciplines have concerned themselves with culture either as a central or peripheral part of their overall project – social anthropology, sociology, social psychology, human geography to name a few. In the development of social science through the nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries a major focus of the overall social science project was concerned with the way that societies reproduced themselves, how institutions, values, patterns of behaviour and so on tend to persist from one generation to the next. This focus tended to produce a macro-focused social science in which attention is directed to the overall ‘system’ and in which concepts like ‘socialisation’ are used to explain how culture is handed down from the generation above to the generation below.

Here we encounter a limitation in many versions of macro social science – the apparent omission of the individual. Human agency is left out, our actions are determined by forces larger than ourselves. As David Walsh has observed looking from the macro position downwards, we lose sight of the way in which interaction produces emergent social reality (Walsh 1972). Similarly, any view of the human being as simply biologically or psychologically determined is equally problematic here. What we see in the world of brand research is a living example of human agency at work in the world. Brand identities come about because human actors implicitly or explicitly pick up on elements from within packaging or advertising or what they see other people doing with a product. Furthermore, they come about because these human actors are doing all of this alongside and together with other human actors who are doing the same or similar things.

Alongside the macro-focused tradition, there has also been a more micro-focused tradition in social science. This micro tradition has been less interested in looking at overall social structure and more interested in how human beings collectively go about the business of living in a social world and posing questions like ‘how does this happen?’ and ‘how is this possible?’. The traditions and schools of action theory, social action theory, symbolic interactionism, phenomenology, ethnomethodology, social construction theory and latterly the ‘intertextuality’ of ‘postmodernism’ leave us with a variety of propositions that can be built into a working theory of culture. A constant theme running through this micro tradition is the proposition that human social behaviour is ‘meaningful’ and that these ‘meanings’ either cause or are implicated in behaviour. In earlier versions (for example, Mead 1934) ‘meaning’ appears as reasonably accessible, about shared values and so on, and directly causal. In later versions (see, for example, Filmer et al. 1972, or Berger 1973, or Berger and Luckmann 1971) meaning is seen as often largely or entirely implicit.

At its heart, the idea of behaviour being underpinned by 'meaning' suggests that it is invested with an emotional value and is implicitly or explicitly directed towards some purpose. Of fundamental importance here is the qualifying proposition that meaning is often taken-for-granted: later schools of micro social science place central emphasis upon the world of 'the taken-for-granted' because, for example, of the key to social life is what people take for granted' (Altheide 1977: 136). Here the crucial proposition is that shared meanings, values and so on are not routinely thought through or articulated but simply 'taken-for-granted' by people. The fact that shoppers queue at a pay desk is underpinned by a raft of shared values that are a part of their culture. With exploration many of these could be uncovered, but in queuing the shoppers don't think about this, they just queue.

Taken collectively, a vast morass of intertwined implicit and sometimes explicit meanings underpin what anyone does, what different social groups and clusters do: 'concepts such as stock of knowledge, recipe knowledge, and typification ... illustrate how meanings and communication are tied to common experience' (Altheide 1977: 137). Some of this network of meaning is partly organised and structured, but it is also largely disorganised and unstructured. Equally, whilst some of it is partly consciously thought about and rationalised/articulable, it is largely vague, inarticulable and taken-for-granted. Thus within this world of largely taken-for-granted meanings conscious 'decision-making' behaviour is exceptional: although, paradoxically, the world of taken-for-granted meanings is crucial in its 'direction' of behaviour.

Within this tradition of cultural theory the routine behaviour of people's 'normal lives' reaffirms meaning. During the course of everyday action, whether it is as consumer, worker, parent, etc., the everyday world of taken-for-granted meanings and its relationship with actual behaviour is built and rebuilt. Much of our everyday 'auto pilot' behaviour reinforces and reaffirms taken-for-granted meanings. We queue today because we queued yesterday. Along with others around us, our collective behaviour endorses the implicit ideas of fair play and 'first come first served' that surround the 'queue'. Routine action provides an affirmation of the implicit meanings that underlie it.

It is also important to stress that all of this taken-for-granted meaning, i.e. culture, is invisibly acquired. Much of this taken-for-granted world is socially inherited, it is the everyday culture we acquire through socialisation and interaction with others. Whether we are learning to be a parent, car salesman, a doctor or a consumer or anything else, the process of learning itself is partly overt and articulated, but it is largely implicit – a process in which signals, codes, patterns and so on are absorbed by the osmotic process of just living and being aware of what goes on around us. We are taught to queue by parents, teachers and so on, but we also witness it as a part of what is done in the everyday world.

Meaning is also changed and improvised: as well as acquiring this taken-for-granted world of culture, we also influence it and, on occasion,

change it through interaction with others. Culture, style, what we take or consume from the media can be actively used by people in all sorts of ways to all sorts of ends (see, for example, Hebdige 1979). Within this taken-for-granted world, things change because people often improvise and experiment on a fairly random basis, creating a process that could be described as 'cultural evolution'. When these improvisations are in some way or other 'successful', i.e. achieve some implicit goal or reward, they are more likely to be repeated and become established as a new pattern of behaviour and, perhaps, subsequently become invested with implicit meaning or even be rationalised or verbalised. We do all of this not alone, but in concert with others; as individual actors we experience the world not as a private, but an intersubjective one (Schutz 1971).

Reality and meaning are socially negotiated: a key element in all of this is the idea that culture (shared meanings, values, patterns of behaviour and so on) is not fixed or static. The everyday lives of people and their interactions, and exchanges with others, can either affirm or adapt or change meaning and behaviour. In this sense social reality is a constantly negotiated and renegotiated product, in a process that is not formal, explicit nor conscious, but is simply the result of everyday interaction. In turn, this negotiated social reality acts back upon its creators as elements of behaviour evolve implied rules around them or simply become another taken-for-granted part of the way things are. Society is a dialectic phenomenon, i.e. a human product but one that continuously acts back on its producers (see for example, Berger 1973) There is a clear place for human agency in determining the nature of the shared social world, but the end result may not be as intended and there may have been no intended result in the first place.

Cultural items and the codes by which they are interpreted are also negotiated. This is partly so because 'differences in experience cause perceptual divergence' (Toch and MacLean 1970: 130) so that 'any given event is differently perceived by different people' (1970: 133). Beyond this, one dimension of this emerging picture of culture which has particular relevance for our purposes is the proposition that specific cultural items and objects are also a negotiated reality:

The highly idiosyncratic character of our meanings is richly documented in studies of perception, particularly in the interpretation of projective tests. Flags, crowns, crosses and traffic signals do not contain meanings; they have meanings thrust upon them. (Barnlund 1970: 88).

For example, art or literature may have meanings intended by their authors, but the actual meaning identified by the reader may be different. Ultimately, it is the reader who creates meaning out of what he or she has encountered: 'a message is an empty form to which various possible senses can be attributed' (Eco 1979: 5); (see also LeBouef and Martre 1977). Likewise, the symbolic reference codes by which these things are 'read' are subject to the same 'negotiation' in and through their everyday use.

BRANDS IN EVERYDAY LIFE

We can take these parallel theories of mind and culture and with them build a clearer understanding of the existence of brands in the everyday lives of people.

For the consumer, brands are a part of everyday life. For any individual consumer a particular brand is made up of an array of associations, feelings, experiences, expectations, thoughts and ideas that are held in a variety of forms: as images, as colours, as words, as sounds, as sensations, as moods, and so on. The links between these form shapes or 'schemata' that infer particular meanings. Most of this 'brand memory' exists at levels that are somewhere below consciousness, 'invisible' in the normal course of events both to the consumer and to any observer.

In all of this there is nothing radical or new happening. The 'messy and loose' organisation of knowledge is characteristic of man the social animal, whether in primitive science (Lévi-Strauss 1966) or totemic systems.

The totemic 'collection' accretes, cumulates, forms agglomerations of items unconnected in systematic logic or in Nature, according to a variety of principles of association. Instead, therefore, of conceiving of totemic schema as an ordered totality, I have called it agglomerative, arbitrary, and fortuitous. (Worsley 1967: 151)

Although this brand memory does not necessarily exist in a completely organised and structured way, there nevertheless are links between different elements, which if triggered can bring sections of this memory to a more active level of mind. Most of this brand memory is passively acquired. Whilst some 'knowledge' about a brand may be consciously recognised, thought about and integrated into an idea set, most of what an individual holds about a brand is 'information' that has been 'processed' far more passively. What is registered, stored and sometimes given meaning comes from the consumer's total encounters with a product, its presentation and marketing, plus what they see of it in the everyday lives of other people around them in the world. What is stored or registered is in effect a consciously or unconsciously negotiated product. Much of this 'information' is never processed; it is not recognised or it is sifted out, some of it is passively stored, some is 'thought about' in some way or given more specific meaning.

None of this takes place in a vacuum. The environment in which consumers encounter brands is often very noisy. There is competing noise from the product characteristics, marketing activities and consumption experience of competing products in the marketplace, and beyond this, what is happening in other marketplaces. Moreover, the consumer's response to all of this takes place within a much broader framework of their own consumer 'needs', which in their turn are a combination of the physiological, the personal and emotional, the collective and the social.

Additionally, there is a well-established understanding that cultural forms, for example music, are often taken and used by different groups to work out, work through or express particular problems or issues in a kind of 'cultural politics' (see, for example, Willis 1978). What is true of other cultural forms can also be true of brands. At different times and in different markets there will be a *Zeitgeist*, an overall climate that helps to define or shape what the issues are (Garcia, personal communication). This in turn influences what consumers focus upon, where they look, and can frame the way in which they interpret things.

Alongside this, a theme that has become more prominent over the past decade has been what might be described as the 'fragmentation of the consumer'. Increasingly there is recognition that consumers cannot be seen as possessing a single, unified and coherent set of attitudes and orientations. In effect the same consumer can display different 'personalities' according to time, situation, peer group, stimuli and so on. To take a few examples:

- 'Portfolio consumers' (Spenser and Wells 2000)
- 'Spider lives' (Edwards 2000)
- 'Moments of identity' (Valentine and Gordon 2000).

All of this occurs in a message-rich environment. The world surrounding the consumer is populated with a morass of communication and potential communication. This 'communication' is of a much more broad-based nature than what we would ordinarily think of as 'messages'; the actions of others, the physical and social world we encounter, conversation, body language, tonality, and so on, all send 'messages'. Like the world of taken-for-granted meanings that these messages feed into, many messages are registered but not consciously thought. Brands can be seen as a part of the rich web of everyday mythology (see, for example, Barthes 1996).

Whilst by definition this is an individual process, it is rarely an isolated one. Typically, this negotiation takes place either overtly or implicitly in concert with others, it makes reference to what they are doing and how they are responding, it makes reference to shared everyday codes of behaviour and symbolic meaning that are themselves constantly evolving through their everyday use. The meaning and significance of this or that brand needs to be identified by any individual consumer but also needs to be affirmed, supported and reinforced by the behaviour of others in the world surrounding that individual consumer. Brands are simultaneously individually and socially constructed.

However, once a brand begins to form some collective shape it starts to act back upon consumers. Thus the 'hipness or coolness' of Nike can only exist as a result of the continued collaborative effort of groups of young people, but at the same time the fact that it is seen as hip or cool can draw in new consumers and continue to hold existing consumers: 'man receives meaning from his world in addition to giving it. Meaning is both

conferred upon the world and derived from it' (Fontana and Van De Water 1977: 122; see also Merleau-Ponty 1964).

The brand that exists for any consumer must ultimately be seen as a unique event; the individual will have his or her own unique set of associations, meanings etc. surrounding the brand – what Wendy Gordon (1999) has called the 'brand imprint' in any individual consumer's head will be unique. In turn, the brand imprint will have its own unique place in that consumer's personal universe. However, there will be considerable overlap with the brand imprints held by other consumers. This overlap will exist partly because the processes of encountering and responding to brands and their communications are partly shared processes and partly because the interpretative codes and frameworks that the consumer uses are also shared with these others. This is precisely why and how brands are associated with patterns of consumer behaviour; they are a part of a world in which social currents ebb and flow.

Thus, products and communications influence but do not determine the nature of the brand. Again, the processes at work here are not confined to the world of brands: 'in the process of communication, a text is frequently interpreted against the background of codes different from those intended by the author' (Eco 1979: 8) Brands are, in effect, constructed by consumers out of what they take from marketing and elsewhere. This individual and collective process is on-going rather than a 'one-off'. Brands are not fixed, they change over time precisely because relationships change between consumers and products and their communication. Changes in what a brand is come about as a result of an implicit 're-negotiation' between consumers and what emanates from producers, suppliers and marketers. Thus, a brand is affected by the product, by its communication, by competitive communication and by changes in consumer culture.

Within the vast realm of passive processing there are different levels and different mechanisms at work. Much is not overtly registered or thought about because it simply affirms what is already 'known'. Some messages will simply be 'acquired' but will lack the personal relevance to excite interest or 'thought', while other messages may be currently 'beyond interpretation', with these either dissipating or settling to become a kind of 'sedimentary deposit' which may become more active later if a frame of reference develops which can make it meaningful. Within all of this the presence or absence of the supportive and affirming activity of others is often crucial, as is the presence or absence of a collective symbolic code which facilitates an interpretation of communications.

In the soft drinks market Coca-Cola carries the pulling power that it does because of the meanings consumers continue to invest in it. Here the real power to sustain the potency of these meanings lies with the consumer and not directly with Coca-Cola. The challenge for Coca-Cola is to devise ways that encourage the consumer to continue to build and rebuild a positive vision of Coke. All of this happens in a world in which other

brands generally and other drinks brands specifically are also shouting for attention and trying to redefine consumer perceptions.

THE NATURAL HISTORY OF A BRAND

Whilst we can talk about brands as simultaneously having their existence in the consumer mind and consumer culture, this still leaves questions unaddressed relating to what might be labelled as 'the natural history of a brand'. This 'natural history' refers to the processes through which brands come into existence as individual and social facts, the processes through which they develop, evolve and change. Much of this follows logically from what has already been said about the consumer mind and consumer culture and the place of brands in everyday life.

For the consumer, some brands are a part of their socialisation process. Established, longstanding brands are frequently just another part of the world that consumers grow up in and grow up into. We learn about the meaning of Coca-Cola, of Ford, of British Airways, as an overall part of much wider social processes. In this the acquisition of brand associations, brand knowledge and so on, is through a partly explicit and largely implicit process of absorbing impressions from the behaviour and responses of others. It is about learning from how others deal with and orientate themselves towards these brands. As with all socialisation processes, this is not simply a 'top-down' process in which totally plastic consumers robotically take on board everything handed down to them. Socialisation processes can also involve a kind of 'bottom-up' feedback through which the consumers' own response and reaction to what they are handed down does 'act back' on the world of other consumers around them. We are not blindly socialised into a particular set of meanings about Coca-Cola, Ford or BA. We respond to these from the perspective of our own life world, which is always in itself new, unique and different, and in our responses we potentially touch upon or influence the feelings and orientations of others around us.

In a similar way, the consumer entering into an established market which is new to them is involved in a process through which shared social knowledge is acquired. For example, adolescent youths develop an understanding of the beer market by absorbing the implicit knowledge of their elders, their elder peers and what they see in the world around them. This is both an individual and peer-based process of exploration and one that involves both explicit and implicit acquisition of 'knowledge'. Here 'knowledge' comprises understanding what drinking is about, what pubs are about, what different types of drink are about, as well as understanding all of the possible meanings that can be associated with or attributed to different beer brands. As young drinkers actively engage with the marketplace, they have the potential to act back upon it. Young drinkers have the opportunity, both on their own and with their peers, to enjoy the

easiness of well-established and entrenched brands, and at the same time, to play, dabble and experiment with other, newer, or more obscure brands and simply experience how these feel or work.

It would be wrong to say that the particular processes that can be seen at work as consumers enter the beer market are the same as those processes at work for consumers entering, for example, the tampon market, the yoghurt market, the trainer or sneaker market, the house market or car market. Every market and every product territory has its own peculiarities. Nevertheless, these peculiarities do not change the fundamentals, they merely 'spin' these in a particular way and direction. Thus, young girls do implicitly and explicitly acquire 'tampon knowledge' through their elders, their peers and peer culture. This knowledge also includes the development of impressions and associations attached to particular tampon brands. This process involves consumers responding to this received 'knowledge' from the unique perspective of their own experiences and individual life world. In turn, this process also involves individual consumers explicitly and implicitly returning their own input into the world around them, through their behaviour and interactions with others, most obviously their peers. Not the same processes, but similar processes are at work within all of these other marketplaces – yoghurt, trainers/sneakers, houses, cars and so on.

Within all of this, the world of brand presentation is a part of the living environment that the consumer experiences. It is a world of packaging, logos, billboards, mailshots, TV commercials, product placements, signage, display, and so on, and so on, and so on. Typically these are not encountered as discreet and individual items that the consumer individually and specifically responds to and consciously organises alongside existing implicit and explicit knowledge. Any one single element, the logo seen on someone's trainers or the particular tone of excitement in the last 3 seconds of a TV ad, is just one element within a torrent that streams by the consumer. This stream of communication contains a vast array of signals, cues and potential meanings.

Outside of the world of advertising and marketing erroneous assumptions are often made about the purpose of marketing communication. Most often there is an assumption that marketing or advertising is all about 'selling'. Here the simplistic assumption is that the purpose of, for example, advertising is to persuade or cajole the consumer into purchase through the presentation of slick images and variously 'talking up' or 'misrepresenting' the realities of a product. Undoubtedly there is an element of this in much or all marketing communication. However, it is possible to present an alternative model, which is equally compelling, and an equally valid description of what goes on in the everyday world. Here it can be argued that marketing, i.e. the building of brand imagery, is as much about communication as it is about 'selling'. Here creating, or attempting to create, a set of subjective associations for consumers, i.e. brand building, can just as readily be seen as attempting to provide

consumers with subjective feelings and frames of reference which enable them to better understand, and therefore buy into, what a brand is about. From this perspective, marketing communication is about attempting to develop in consumers a particular emotional orientation and subjective way of understanding a brand; it is not necessarily about 'selling' it to them at all costs or in all circumstances.

In part, the flow of signals, cues and so on running past the consumer as a part of their everyday world will be composed of cues and signals from 'new' or 'nascent' brands, i.e. those brands which have yet to be created by the consumer. As with established brands, the cues and signals given will be sifted, sorted or simply 'parked'. However, both research experience and understanding of the consumer mind suggest that signals and cues from the 'new' or 'nascent' brand need to somehow do more to be 'noticed' either at the level of consciousness or somewhere beneath it. Here the proposition is that signals and cues relating to an established brand are somewhat more likely to have some link made with them. The 'new' or 'nascent' brand cannot rely on elements of an established network of meaning, however loose and disparate, for the consumer mind to link into.

In these instances, brands will be new to the consumer and there are questions here about the emergence of what we might call a 'brand identity' or the aggregate of the total array of brand perceptions in consumers' minds. The development of a brand identity from scratch in the consumers' world will have some aspects to it that are unique. The features and factors that are pertinent to a particular marketplace are distinctive from and different from other marketplaces and are constantly evolving and changing within any marketplace. Equally, the implicit and explicit needs, wants and desires of consumers are also a changing and evolving platform.

Nevertheless, new or nascent brands must develop through a number of processes. The development of brand identity requires that, at the very least, consumers passively process some signals and cues relating to the 'nascent' brand. The development of a nascent brand identity also requires that, at some level, this brand 'information' is implicitly related by consumers to their own feelings, need states and so on. The development of a brand identity requires that these various signals and cues begin to form into some network of meanings or associations, linked together, however, loosely. Indeed, state of the art neuroscience would suggest that it is this brand 'schemata' which is far more important than any individual element within a set of brand memories (Franzen and Bouwman 2001). At some further point the development of brand identity also requires that consumers achieve some collective orientation to the brand, probably explicitly sharing some sense of its meaning whilst implicitly sharing others.

The development of brand identity also requires that consumers start to behave in relation to the brand. At one level this may simply be in terms of taking some implicit or explicit cognisance of it, so that it shifts their overall

perspective of a marketplace, even if only by introducing an additional feature into the market terrain. At this behavioural level, the development of brand identity will also involve the consumer in getting closer to or 'approaching' the brand. In some markets this may be in terms of actual experimental use, e.g. in markets where purchase is low risk, say the impulse purchase of a new chocolate bar. In other instances this may involve clear, although quite possibly impulsive, attempts to gain or develop brand knowledge/experience, e.g. high investment, high risk markets like automotive, where glossy advertising or visits to showrooms might be 'used' as a mechanism to build up an understanding of marques and models – means that are at the same time both conscious and intuitive.

At some point during these individual and collective processes through which a brand evolves, the signals and cues which have been registered or taken on board in different ways and at all sorts of different levels may begin to form into a loosely coalescing system of meaning. If, and when, this begins to occur these schemata can in turn become a part of the consumer's own meaning structure and orientation system. Here we may begin to talk of brand identities becoming 'internalised'; becoming a part of the orientational equipment through which the consumer 'sees' the world. It is important to stress here that this process is not unusual and does not need to be seen as profound. It is simply about consumers making the intuitive assumption that, for example, 'it does exactly what it says on the tin' is a genuine and valid subjective criterion of some importance in the use of paint and varnishes. In this instance it is clear that when a consumer absorbs such sets of meaning and takes them on board as their own this has in some small way changed the consumer's world; but it has only moved their world a little, it has not shaken it.

CONCLUSIONS

In Chapter 1 we attempted to define the overall nature and character of brands, identifying them as meaningful cultural phenomena existing within the consumer mind and exerting influence over consumer behaviour. In this chapter we have attempted to articulate the psychological and sociological processes through which brands come into existence, and evolve and change over time. We have tried to make explicit what qualitative research implicitly takes as axiomatic; the idea that brands have a simultaneous existence as individual and collective realities. Whilst they are present in the conscious and unconscious mind of the individual consumer, they are also shared at a more collective level with others.

A key part of our exploration here was also the proposition that brands are in various ways either created by consumers or at least somehow actualised or made real by them. The picture presented has been one of brands as 'negotiated' by consumers acting both individually and collectively, interpreting and behaving both consciously and unconsciously.

KEY POINTS

- Current understanding of how the human mind works reveals that conscious, rational and linguistic thought is only a small component of overall mental activity.
- Current understanding of how culture works places much emphasis upon the implicit negotiation of everyday life through behaviour.
- Brands exist as a part of consumers' everyday world.
- Brands are 'negotiated' by consumers interacting with brand communications on an individual and collective basis.
- The mental and cultural processes through which this happens are relatively 'invisible'.



Branding and Brand Modelling

This chapter explores how the marketing industry endeavours to control brand formation within the everyday lives of consumers. Here we distinguish between brand portraits and brand models. In particular, we examine brand modelling as a way of planning the brand development process. Different brand models are examined and explored. Finally, we attempt to synthesise learning from a variety of different brand models.

THE NEGOTIATED BRAND

So far, our analysis has been entirely focused upon the world of the consumer and has largely ignored, other than by implication, the world of clients, marketing, advertising and so on. However, it is self-evidently true that this client world exerts some influence over how brands develop and exerts this influence through the messages it projects into the consumer world. An entire industry of marketing, advertising, promotions, PR and so on has its central purpose focused on brands. The *raison d'être* of this industry is the creation of brands or, more correctly, encouraging their development.

Underlying much of the market research brand literature and much brand research practice is the core idea that brands are a negotiated reality. Brands are the end product of a process that involves consumers interpreting and responding to signals in the world around them: 'the added values the brand has (functional and non-functional) are built in the minds of consumers' (Gordon 1996: 36). Consumers do not make up brand identities out of nothing, they build these out of what is available to them and made available to them. There is an assumption underlying qualitative research that brands are constructed by the consumer out of what they take from marketing and elsewhere. Thus, as a brand develops or changes, and the nature of its consumer attraction or 'pull' changes, this comes about as a result of an implicit negotiation between consumers and what emanates from producers, suppliers and marketers.

At this level any brand must be seen as affected by its own communication, and/or competitive communication and/or changes in consumer culture. In this sense brands can be seen as emerging from the interplay

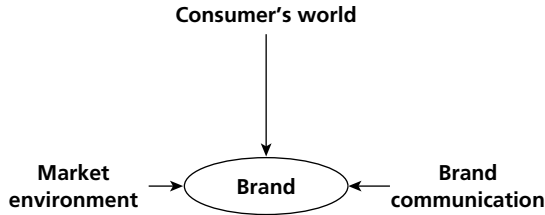


FIGURE 3.1 *Brand interaction model (after Chandler and Owen 1998)*

of the differing worlds of the consumer, brand communication and the market culture in which it occurs. Peter Cooper, for example, has talked about brands as sets of 'rules and meanings' that come about as a result not of single communications but of a filtering of packaging, corporate identity, advertising past and present, experiences of a product, hearsay and so on (Cooper 1980).

Confronted by a vast weight of marketing in the everyday world, consumers respond to only some of it. Some of this response is conscious, much of it is not. Where people do register or respond in some way to marketing this may be in part because of 'needs' in their own life or world, it may be influenced by others around them, or it may be influenced by their own experience and what they have seen or heard from other brands. Again, their everyday reality will generally be a mix of all of this and much else. We have portrayed this elsewhere as an interplay between the consumer's world, market culture and brand communication (see Figure 3.1).

It has been argued that research should be viewed as an intrinsic element of the branding process; rather than simply informing brand development it should become embodied in the process of branding itself (Griffiths 1992). In many instances this heavy research and researcher involvement in brand development is seen as a necessary counterweight to structural problems inside organisations: the high turnover of brand managers (Irmscher 1993), lack of strategic thinking (de Chernatony and Riley 1997) and a short-term focus on building market share rather than the brand itself (de Chernatony and Riley 1997).

This chapter will not attempt to explore the whole science or art of marketing, advertising and so on, but will focus upon one key aspect of this world – the planning of attempts to *influence the course of brand development*.

MARKETING, BRANDING AND BRANDS

Wendy Gordon has identified two distinct meanings for the term **branding**:

Branding. Two meanings: (1) the process which may take decades, by which a brand comes to have added values and involves long term support by

communications (either above or below the lines; (2) the associative strength between an advertisement (usually) and a brand expressed as a positive or negative relationship, i.e. 'well branded' or 'poorly branded'. (Gordon 1999: 324)

For our purposes, we need to focus upon the former interpretation or definition of branding. Here branding is seen as the process by which attempts are made to influence how consumers interpret and develop their own sense of what a brand is, what it is about and what it means. From this viewpoint branding becomes almost synonymous with the whole process of marketing itself; the two things can be seen as either the same or at least as working in the same broad arena. It is from marketing that consumers take, whether actively or passively, consciously or unconsciously, some of the raw materials which they use (partly consciously, but largely unconsciously) to help build their own sense of what a brand is. This is not a viewpoint that is somehow distinctive or unique, it is implicit in the whole exercise of qualitative research into brands and branding.

In considering marketing and brands it is important to conceptualise or define marketing (and branding) in its broadest sense. Looked at in terms of effect rather than intent, marketing comprises everything and anything which can potentially communicate about a brand and which can in some way be controlled by the brand owner or its agencies. Most obviously, marketing can be seen as comprising the following elements:

- Advertising: press, radio, TV and new emerging media such as the Internet
- Packaging and presentation
- Product information, communication, usage instructions and so on
- Customer servicing and all forms of customer interface
- Retail, sales or delivery environments
- Public relations
- etc., etc.

Increasingly, the complexity of communicating through any combination of the above, and other mechanisms, suggests the need for some direction, planning and control of what is communicated and how it is communicated. This is the central province of brand modelling.

Brand modelling can be seen as the process through which an abstract picture is generated of what a brand owner ideally desires their brand to be. This is fundamentally different from the process through which an abstract picture is created of what a brand actually is in the here and now of the consumer world. Jean-Noel Kapferer confronts this vital distinction head on in contrasting between what he labels '**brand identity**' and '**brand image**':

brand image is on the receiver's side. Image research focuses on the way in which certain groups perceive a product, a brand, a politician, a company or a country. The image refers to the way in which these groups decode all of the signals emanating from the products, services and communication covered by the brand.

Identity is on the sender's side. The purpose, in this case, is to specify the brand's meaning, aim and self-image. Image is both the result and interpretation thereof. In terms of brand management, identity precedes image. (Kapferer 1997: 94)

Whilst Kapferer's use of terminology here can be confusing, the underlying idea is quite crucial. Kapferer is making a distinction between how a brand is *currently* perceived on the one hand and, on the other hand, a guiding blueprint or model of how the brand should *ideally* be perceived. The former is about current market intelligence, the latter is about future market planning. Taking this key proposition, it is important to distinguish here between the creation of what we might call 'brand portraits' and the creation of 'brand models'. Here a **brand portrait** is seen as an overall representation of how a brand currently exists within consumers' perceptions in a particular marketplace; a snapshot of what the brand actually is in the here and now. Against this we wish to contrast the idea of a **brand model**, a client-side blueprint which is used to guide various levels and types of brand communication into the world of the consumer.

BRAND PORTRAITS

In the worlds of marketing and research there are many different versions of both brand portraits and brand models. Different brand portraits have been variously labelled as; the 'brand imprint', the 'brand footprint', the 'brand fingerprint', the 'brand diamond' and the 'brand essence'. There is perhaps even greater proliferation of differing brand models: the 'brand cube', the 'brand wheel', the 'brand key', the 'brand essence', the 'brand platform', the 'brand central bullseye'. This chapter will focus mostly upon the complex issue of brand modelling, but some review of brand portraits is useful.

The idea of a brand portrait is simply about finding a way of articulating and portraying all of the elements of a brand as it exists within consumer culture. As well as exploring issues of brand modelling, Wendy Gordon (1999) has provided three different examples of brand portraits; the 'brand fingerprint' the 'brand diamond' and 'brand essence'. Each of these has its own virtues and they are actually complementary to one other. It is useful to explore these as three particular examples of how different brand portraits can be used according to different need.

The '**brand fingerprint**' is an example of a brand portrait that simply tries to capture and set down the elements of a brand as they exist in the consumer mind. It does this by simply organising memories as they have been etched in the consumer mind under the headings of visual, taste, smell, feelings, sounds/pace (see Gordon 1999: 222) This is an example of a brand portrait based upon the proposition that 'brands exist as a jumble of images in peoples heads' (Gordon 1999: 220) and that brands exist in the consumer mind in a complex variety of forms precisely because 'all human beings experience the world through the five senses – visual (sight), auditory (sound), olfactory (smell), gustatory (taste) and kinaesthetic (touch and feelings) – which code, sort and file the information in the mind' (Gordon 1999: 220). And finally, that 'competitive brands have quite clear brand fingerprints: British Airways is distinctly different from American Airlines; Smirnoff Vodka from Absolut; the Famous Grouse from Bells and Teachers whisky' (Gordon 1999: 221). Thus the brand fingerprint, and portraits like it, endeavour simply to register and portray the impressions that a brand has made upon the consumer mind.

In the '**brand diamond**' we have an example of a brand portrait which moves beyond simple identification of what has been somehow lodged or stored in the mind about the brand, towards an identification of some of what this means to the consumer. This is a brand portrait that is both descriptive and analytic, attempting to capture perceptions, associations and assumptions surrounding the brand together with the potential fit of these with the consumer life and world. Here the brand diamond operates with five or six key facets (see Gordon 1999: 222):

- **User image:** creating an overall portrait of consumer perceptions of the type of people using a brand.
- **Occasion image:** portraying consumer perceptions of likely usage occasions, situations, moods and so on which the brand is felt to fit.
- **Service image:** encapsulating consumer perceptions of the way in which the brand or service is provided or delivered to its customers or consumers.
- **Product image:** reflecting consumer beliefs about product or brand characteristics.
- **Brand personality:** reflecting consumers' implicit relationship with the brand though identifying the type of person or being that it is.
- **Emotional closeness or distance:** attempts to portray the significance that the brand has for the various groups of consumers involved with it.

Wendy Gordon also provides a third example or variant of a brand portrait in the shape of what she labels the '**brand essence**', a brand portrait which is even more analytic in its nature (see Gordon 1999: 229). Here a portrait of the brand is built by members of the research team each identifying from their understanding of consumer responses the attributes of

the brand (physical properties associated with it), benefits of the brand, values of the brand, personality of the brand and finally the essence of the brand (the core truth driving it). Here the brand essence model is 'hierarchical in that it assumes that the most important brand values lie in the centre and the least important on the outside. Importance, in this case, refers to the power to differentiate from competitors' (Gordon 1999: 228).

The above examples of brand portraits illustrate different ways in which the character and nature of brands 'out there in the world' can be captured and portrayed. These are three specific examples drawn from a wide array that can and have been used. What is important about them is not so much their particular structure and characteristics, but more the fact that they represent a descriptive and analytic discipline which can provide clear benefits when applied with a mixture of rigour and common sense. This last point is crucial. There is no right or wrong brand portrait or set of brand portraits. The key criterion here must be their usefulness in describing brands within a particular marketplace.

WHAT IS BRAND MODELLING?

The distinction made here between brand portraits and brand models is of vital importance and significance. Whilst different labels can be, and have been, used to describe what lies on either side of this distinction, the distinction itself is fundamental. The idea of a brand portrait is (as above) simply an attempt to describe the character and nature of a brand as it exists in the world. Quite distinct from this is the idea of what we are calling a 'brand model'; something that is not about a portrait of a brand as it does exist, but a tool that can be used to guide the development of brand communications. A brand model defines the fundamental shape of the would-be brand, it is the defining plan from which all communication should flow.

Brand modelling, that is, the process through which brand models are developed, is a central part of the brand development process. Some client companies, advertising agencies research agencies and so on, have for a long time worked with various 'brand models' and brand modelling processes. Others have come to this more recently. Here it is important to stress that this is neither uniform nor universal. There is no single model that all subscribe to, or a single process that all adhere to. Some companies, agencies and so on do not work with any formal or systematised approach to brand modelling; they do not do it at a visible or explicit level. However, even where no model is ever specifically developed and where no formal process exists, some more invisible and sporadic process, even if entirely instinctive, logically must underpin any development of brand strategy or tactics. Planning the development of a brand often does not involve the use of a formal model *but* similar processes are at work. '**Brand positioning**' is a label often given to research projects in which key elements of the brand modelling process are present. The absence of an

explicit brand model from such research projects is not necessarily a hindrance, although there are clearly benefits of discipline and rigour which can come from operating with a more formal model.

Where brand modelling exists at a formal level, it is a way of organising thinking and planning in the brand development process. The idea of the brand model is about defining what the brand should be 'out there' in the marketplace. The core idea underlying the development of a brand model is that, once developed, this should be a central reference point in the whole marketing process; this should drive all brand communication and all brand communication should, at some level at least, refer to it.

The development of a brand model is a detailed and high-level analytic process. This process requires skill, experience, dedication, application and time. Brand modelling is a process that needs to be informed by research but not driven by it. The brand modelling process requires inputs, involvement and 'buy-in' from a brand team from their agency teams who are and will be working on developing brand communications. The brand modelling process is not an instant one; it requires considerable dedication of time and energy. This process also requires a heavy input from research at all stages. There is no 'perfect' blueprint for a brand modelling process, which is suited to all occasions. The key point about brand modelling is that it does need ideally to take place within an agreed process, with which all involved parties are reasonably comfortable. In turn, the brand modelling process requires that there is at least some pre-agreement within the brand modelling team as to the overall structure and character of the model to be employed. Here there is a need for an agreed model that is:

- acknowledged and respected by all parties involved;
- suited to and tailored to the nature of the particular market involved; and
- suited to and tailored to internal company structures and processes.

Overall, the key benefit of brand modelling and the development of an explicit brand model is that it represents overt rather than covert planning. Here the brand model can serve as a central reference point for all those who are involved in the brand and as a central reference point for all communication about the brand. Here the brand model exists as a focal point around which a brand team can organise itself, can recognise common purposes and goals, and identify paths through which these may be achieved. In all of this the process of modelling, the model itself and the work that subsequently springs from it can help a team coalesce and integrate; the brand model can help to give a team a greater sense of purpose and identity. As a tool for overt planning, a brand model also provides for consistency of direction in the brand's development over time. It can aid in the development of consistency of purpose across different communication vehicles (and between different agencies) and, where appropriate,

across different markets where international brand development is concerned. Just as significantly, a brand model can help to avoid the pitfalls of inconsistent or constantly changing communication.

BRAND MODELS

In discussing brand portraits, it was clear that there is no singular, ideal and perfect brand portrait. Likewise, the same is true of brand models. Many different blueprints or skeletal structures for brand modelling exist within different client companies, advertising agencies, brand development agencies and research agencies. Many of these are jealously guarded by organisations who feel, rightly or wrongly, that there is something precious and unique about their own particular skeletal model. Although many are guarded and trademark protected, some of these brand models do exist within the public arena and provide useful illustrations of different brand models and the brand modelling process itself. Here, again by way of illustration, we shall examine three: the 'brand platform', the 'central bullseye', and the 'brand cube'.

The first example of a brand model is that of the '**brand platform**' as articulated by Paul Feldwick and Françoise Bonnal:

The brand platform is conceptually simple: it involves finding agreed, coherent and stimulating answers to a number of questions

- The origin, founding myth, or anchorage.
 - The brand's area of competence and skill.
 - The brand's point of difference from others.
 - The ideal client of the brand and what it means to them to be the brand's client.
 - The mission or 'fight' [in French, *le combat*] for the brand.
 - The brand personality.
 - The key value underlying the brand.
 - Finally, a summation in one line which we call the strategic platform.
- (1995: 94)

Thus the 'brand platform' model is an example of a way of structuring a variety of brand goals to serve as a reference point from which brand communication and development can be planned. Whilst the brand platform exists as a concrete model, Feldwick and Bonnal are at pains to point out that developing the brand platform is a broad and complex process:

The process is consensual. It draws on consumer research, market research, predictions for future developments of the market environment; it also draws on the past history of the brand, its products and presentations; but it also develops from the company's internal culture and the views and ambitions of the individuals involved, and the company's skills and resources. Over the course of around three to six months, consultants from

DDB Needham review internal and external research sources, including those relating to the brand's history, and also interview as many people as possible within the organisation to understand both its culture and its strength. Findings and interpretation are fed back to a steering committee including senior managers in a series of debriefs, leading to a brain-storming session in which answers to the key questions can be created and agreed. (Feldwick and Bonnal 1995: 94)

A second example of a brand model can be seen in the '**central bullseye**' as presented by Fiona McNae in MRS Training 2000 (McNae 2000). In this model a variety of brand elements are seen as springing out of a 'key insight into needs and wants on which the brand builds' (McNae 2000: 33). The 'central bullseye' attempts to model a brand by defining three key elements, namely *the proposition*, *the benefits* and the *substantiators* around a central pivot of the brand's 'essence', i.e. its 'genetic code' or 'what it stands for'. Beyond this there is an external ring in this 'eyeball' model with two further territories of *values* (beliefs and guiding principles) and *personality* (human characteristics that set tone and feel). In turn these central key elements of the brand lead to a *key take-out* the 'key reason for choosing brand in consumer language' (Fiona McNae 2000: 33).

A third example of a brand model can be seen in the form of the '**brand cube**' (Context Research International 1999). This is a model that has been developed for use within service industries to help define the delivery of services to customers. In this connection the brand cube is nothing more than a particular set of steps and tasks designed to help find the way to an end point of defining an appropriate core brand essence for service businesses. Through a series of internal company team collaborations and customer group exercises the process works towards achieving a clearer idea of what the brand essence needs to be.

The model is based on a Rubik's cube design, with each one of nine blocks being used to define different key areas. There are two sides to this model, with each side contributing to the central service brand essence. One side of this model is aimed at defining the customer side of the equation (and is heavily research-dependent), thus: (1) The Competition, (2) The Customer, (3) Customer Needs, (4) Core Need. The other side of this model is internally focused; it involves defining what the service should actually be, in a number of key respects: (5) Values/Personality, (6) Customer Benefits, (7) Belief Triggers, (8) Customer Discriminator. The interplay of the two sides finally allows us to arrive at a definition of the brand essence.

TOWARDS A SYNTHESIS OF BRAND MODELS

The foregoing examples provide illustrations of different brand models. It is noteworthy that whilst none of these is identical, they all nevertheless contain some similar or common elements. Any review of a range of other

brand modelling devices will produce similar conclusions. In exploring the broad range of brand models used in branding and brand development research it is clear that, whilst often appearing very different, there is some underlying commonality:

- Some elements or themes recur again and again in virtually all brand models, e.g. imagery, values, personality, essence, etc.
- On occasion, very different terminology is used to describe what are actually similar underlying goals or purposes.

Out of an analysis of various brand models it is possible to draw together an array of different elements into a synthesis. Before embarking on this exercise, it is perhaps worth noting that most brand models do not explicitly articulate any sense of the wider market background that modelling has taken account of, and that brand development has to take into account. This may be seen as a limitation of some of these brand models. Here Des Byrne has argued for a kind of Darwinian analysis of brands:

Some are more fit to survive than others and we need to adopt this approach to analysing our brands, to have any chance of establishing which other organisms they compete with, what sort of nourishment they need to help them survive and thrive. What sort of developments threaten the survival of the species and which ones add to its chances of survival? We can do huge damage to our brands by trying to plant them in unsuitable soil. Force feeding them is most certainly a short term measure that proves damaging in the long run. (Byrne 2001: 12)

Taking up this theme, it is evident that key aspects of the wider environment are often missing from brand models. Here there is an argument to be made that brand models need either to include or refer to this broader environment, since this is a key part of any brand's frame of reference. Failure to recognise any key aspects of this broader frame of reference will clearly create a risk that planning is faulty. Conversely, recognition of the opportunities that this broader environment offers can be a vital springboard in planning (this is discussed further in Chapter 5). Here a number of key elements in this wider environment could usefully be incorporated into the brand modelling process:

- **Competitive set:** identification of the other key products/brands with which our brand desires to compete and with which it actually competes; for example, in developing a new commuter motorcycle are we competing with other motorcycles or cars, buses, trains and taxis, or even with the principle of 'homeworking'?
- **Market parameters:** current and potential: deciding exactly what market we are in and what markets we are not in; for example, we show films but are we in the cinema business or the evening out business; we

sell drinks but are we in the pub business or the entertainment business; in developing a new bottled beer are we in the beer or casual wear market?

- **Market dynamics:** what underlying factors are driving or influencing our market and how are these developing or changing over time; are we providing a traditionally crafted product in a market where the whole movement is towards throwaway convenience?
- **Market contradictions:** what tensions exist within the way the market currently works, are there contradictions or inconsistencies built into current patterns of attitude and behaviour that could be 'resolved' in other ways; for example, can we invent the 'hatchback' as the solution to the undiagnosed or unrecognised problems of small saloon cars?

Examining the brand models used in various brand modelling processes, a number of core elements or ideas can be identified: audience, consumer truths, substantiators, imagery/values, personality, brand contract, positioning, proposition and brand essence. Exploring each of these elements in more detail provides an illustration both of what these ideas are trying to capture and how they can be integrated into an overall brand model – a 'synthetic' model. Once again we should stress that there cannot be a perfect brand model. This therefore is not a perfect brand model, it is an attempt to draw together some of the best and most useful features of existing brand models.

This **Advanced Brand Model** incorporates four overall territories or zones:

- A clear definition of key aspects of the market context (as outlined above).
- A clear definition of target audience and what makes them 'tick'.
- A clear definition of key aspects of the brand's core.
- An identification of the brand's overall character that leads towards brand communication.

In this Advanced Brand Model the idea of the **brand audience** relates to a definition of the target population or audience to which the brand is directed. Here there is a need to achieve a reasonably precise or clear definition of those people at whom the brand will be targeted. In part this is about defining their relative breadth or specificity as a part of the market; are they a large segment of the market or an exclusive niche? Ideally this also needs to incorporate some definition of the common needs and motivations of these target groups as distinct from others outside the target group. Here the target audience may be given clearer definition through specific segmentation research. The underlying motivational base of the 'audience' will be specifically developed within the idea of the 'consumer truth'.

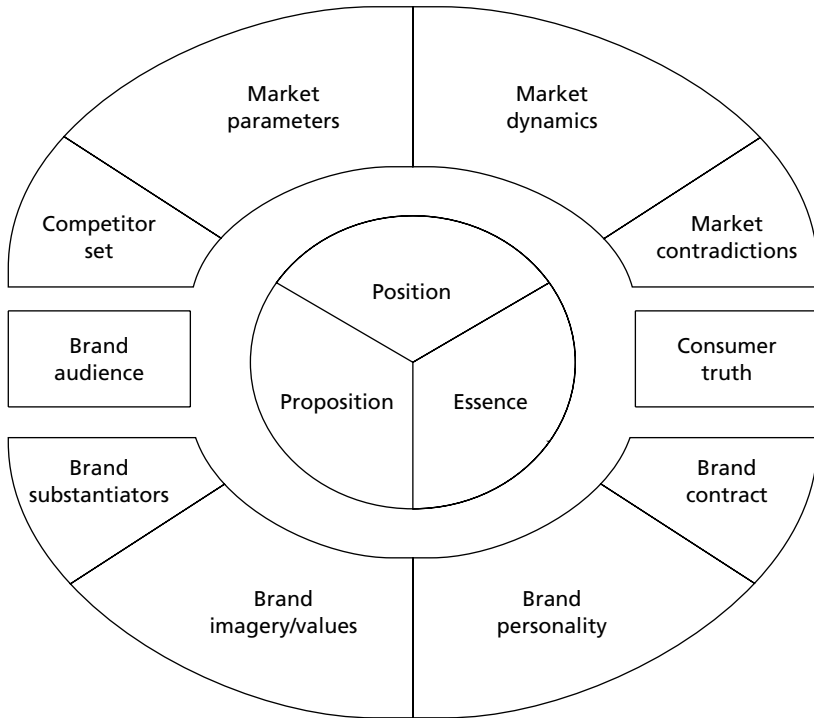


FIGURE 3.2 *The Advanced Brand Model*

The idea of the brand's audience is closely linked to the second key feature of this overall brand modelling process, which is the identification of consumer insights or **consumer truths**. Here the idea of a core 'consumer insight' or 'motivation' is central to many brand models and much of the rest of the development of a brand model flows from this. What is important about this idea is that somewhere a brand should be rooted in a key 'consumer truth'; an emotional drive or driver, or an idea or set of ideas about the world or life that has an almost incontrovertible character. At times these might even appear as clichés: for instance, 'a little bit of what you fancy does you good' would be a reasonable 'consumer truth' from which to begin the development of a luxury chocolate brand. Alternatively, the key consumer truth might be a unique new understanding of consumers' motivations or as yet undeveloped motivations. The key point here is that this 'consumer truth' gives us a solid anchor point for the rest of the brand's development.

Identifying what makes our target audience 'tick', their emotional needs or motivators, is about establishing what consumers are really trying to do, or are ideally trying to address, when they apply a nappy cream, or take a pain killer for a headache, when they buy an ice cream, take out a pension plan, treat a patient with hypertension, or decide

where to place their vote at an election, etc., etc. The point here is that relatively subtle differences in motivation will call for distinctions in other dimensions of the brand model. In turn, these will call for differences in message, image, style, tone of voice and so on in branding activities. These distinctions are not about establishing a rational basis for product superiority, they are about establishing an emotional sense that 'Brand A' is better fitted to and more in tune with 'my life, my world, my needs' because it appears to speak in a language that is more in tune with these.

A further recurrent element in brand models is the notion of 'reasons to believe' or **brand substantiators**. These may be seen as key message points that both create and support the idea of positioning as a unique place in the consumer's mind. Here substantiators may relate to some combination of the brand's features and characteristics at a more concrete level or to its heritage, *raison d'être* and so on at a more abstract level.

In turn, some notion of **brand imagery and values** is universal within brand models and brand modelling. Here the brand model needs to articulate the perception that the target audience is ideally to have of a brand at an emotional level as a result of the way that the brand presents itself through its symbolism and iconography. At this level defining brand imagery is less about identifying particular symbolism and more about identifying the positive and motivating feelings that the brand seeks to generate, the feelings that will make it uniquely attractive to customers.

Alongside brand imagery, ideas of **brand personality** are virtually universal within brand models. Often this is described as the attempt to depict the brand as if it were a person or a human being. The point here is that the brand will attempt to establish relationships with consumers and communicate with them. Brand personality attempts to capture the way in which the brand needs to present itself to its target audience. This is less about what the brand says and more about how it says it; it is about the tenor, style and tone of voice in which the brand presents itself to the world and orientates itself in the world.

Various elements within brand models have in different ways touched upon an idea which is labelled the **brand contract** by Jean-Noel Kapferer (1997). Most often, we see this in ideas about some notion of 'brand promise' or 'brand benefits'. All of these ideas rotate around a core theme of identifying and articulating 'what's in it for the consumer'. Here there is a need for any brand model that seeks to draw from the best of others to include some articulation of what the brand offers to the target audience at a conscious and/or subconscious level. The brand contract is about articulating the rational and emotional benefits of a brand, which may be practical, functional, social, psychological and so on. Subsuming these benefits under the umbrella of the brand contract brings home to us the idea that the brand does make an implicit 'deal' with the consumer, a 'deal' in which failure to deliver on this promise represents a kind of 'breach of contract' to the consumer. The idea of the brand contract strongly implies the risks involved in any failure or shortcomings in delivery.

Somewhere at the centre or core of almost all brand models are various ideas that try to get to the heart of what a brand is about, and what it is supposed to be about for the consumer. Here various terms are used such as brand essence, brand promise, positioning or unique selling proposition. Traditionally, when clients have talked about conducting 'positioning research' it has often been research aimed at developing areas covered by this brand core and some other elements, such as 'substantiators'. (Although equally often 'positioning research' is a label applied to the process of establishing many of the key elements of a brand model – consumer needs, brand essence and so on.) Examining these ideas of positioning, essence and so forth, it is clear that there is some overlap between them, but also some suggestion of difference. All of these ideas are trying to capture things that feel like they are close to the heart of what any brand is all about. They are attempting to describe such elements as:

- How the brand is located in the marketplace relative to other brands (i.e. the territory that it is intended to occupy).
- The unique place that the brand occupies in the consumer's mind.
- The core proposition that the brand is to offer the consumer.

What we see in all these ideas are attempts to define or capture a **brand core**. Traditionally, as noted above, these have been the province of what has been variously labelled as 'positioning research' or sometimes 'brand essence' research. Here we would suggest that all three serve a useful purpose and that their identification will add value and understanding to the brand development process. However, they are most useful when clearly and separately defined as follows:

- **The brand proposition:** a statement of what the brand offers to the consumer. Often the proposition will need to be linked across to the substantiators or 'reasons to believe'. However, this is not always the case and need not necessarily be so. For example, it is clear that some brands can achieve success built simply upon the uniqueness of their imagery or by speaking to target audiences that are not addressed by other brands. Here the idea that a brand must have some USP, or 'Unique Selling Proposition', is common and some concept of a point of uniqueness occurs in almost all brand models. Often this is described as, or is confused with, a positioning, but in reality there is a clear difference.
- **The brand essence:** a brief statement of the most important aspects of the brand as a whole; reducing what the brand is all about to its bare essentials – a single word, phrase or sentence that summarises or captures the most important aspects of a brand as a whole. Here brand essence represents a shorthand way of instantly encapsulating what the brand is about. In some cases these brand 'essence' statements may actually find their way through into advertising straplines, for example

British Airways, 'The World's Favourite Airline' or BMW's 'The Ultimate Driving Machine'. In other instances they remain simply an internal reference point.

- **The brand position:** a statement of how the consumer should see the brand in the context of the competitive marketplace. Here position refers to the role that the brand is aiming to have in the marketplace as defined by the audience at which it is targeted. Position, as distinct from the wider process of 'positioning', is about how the brand fits into the marketplace and into behaviour patterns. Again, with this more focused designation of 'position', there is still a vital need to indicate how this position links with background aspects of the marketplace, the audience and their needs or motivations.

Within many actual processes of brand modelling there is often an underlying assumption of *coherence*, although this is not always visible in the models themselves and is not often a part of any discussion of them in the literature. Nevertheless there needs to be some recognition of the notion that to be of real benefit the brand model must be considered as an 'organism' in which each element fits with, and relates to, each other element to create a brand that presents itself in a consistent and coherent manner. This does not mean that it is possible simply to derive one element from another but rather that each element is related to each other element. For example, the benefits (in the brand contract) are made possible by the features (in the substantiators) and the essence is inextricably tied in to the values, imagery and positioning. Without 'coherence' brands become more open to interpretation by the consumer and the 'negotiated reality' is less likely to be that desired by the brand owner.

Thus far the whole idea of brand modelling has been presented as a *single-layer* process. The brand models outlined earlier and the synthetic model presented above consist simply of a primary layer; what you see is what you get. Conversely we know that established or existing brands are comprised of whole layers and webs of meaning and association; Wendy Gordon's idea of the 'brand footprint', i.e. the words, the sounds, the images, taste sensations and so on that make up a brand in the consumer mind, are an attempt to capture this. When developing potential brands we look to identify the whole realm of meaning, association and imagery that could be pertinent to a new brand. All of this suggests that within brand modelling there may be some virtue in developing multi-layered models. In such a multi-layered approach the primary layer could be usefully underpinned by:

- a secondary layer in which we create a more detailed portrait of the brand, perhaps developing a more comprehensive account of what the *brand aspires to be*, for example, in terms of images, associations, descriptors and so on; and
- a third layer in which we try to map out the total *potential territory of meaning* within a marketplace. Such a tertiary layer would thus

incorporate areas that brand communication might attempt to exploit and would delineate those areas it should avoid.

This approach may be of particular value when considering the issue of global branding. Here, the multi-layered model allows us to adopt a global brand strategy (where appropriate) that is delineated in the primary layer whilst recognising historical or culturally driven differences in the way that the brand will achieve its objectives at a more national/local level. The brand then achieves the global brand goal of being recognisable across geographical and cultural boundaries whilst simultaneously meeting the need to adapt to different competitive environments and different cultures.

KEY POINTS

A range of key propositions emerge from this review of brand modelling processes:

- It is important to distinguish between brand portraits and brand models.
- Brand modelling can be an important part of the strategic process of developing brands, whether new or existing.
- Although many different types of brand model have been developed, many of these contain consistent themes.
- It is possible to create an overall 'synthetic' brand model, which endeavours to exploit the best of all.

4

Why Use Qualitative Research to Look at Brands and Branding?

This chapter examines why qualitative research is uniquely placed to explore and understand the world of brands. Here we attempt to develop an epistemology or theory of knowledge for qualitative market research. We examine the problems of validity in brand research and explore how qualitative research is best placed to address these issues of validity.

MARKET RESEARCH EPISTEMOLOGY

Thus far we have explored ideas and views of what brands are (Chapter 1), the how and the where of the existence of brands (Chapter 2) and how implicit or explicit processes of brand modelling aid in the planning of communications that attempt to influence brand development (Chapter 3). This is a book about qualitative market research and brand development, but much of it so far has focused on the world of brands and not the world of qualitative research. It is now time to pose a set of questions that take us more directly to the world of qualitative market research; if this is what brands are, if this is how they exist, if this is how strategies for influencing their development are created, then how can qualitative market research provide an input and on what basis can it claim to offer anything more than just another view? This chapter will address the last of these questions by attempting to make explicit the largely implicit theory of knowledge or 'epistemology' that underlies qualitative market research.

Commercial qualitative research as it is practised today involves the researcher in encounters with people in which the researcher tries to achieve greater understanding and knowledge primarily through 'interviewing' people. This interviewing is done either on a one-to-one basis, or with larger numbers; pairs, trios or larger groups. Whilst this 'interviewing' process is usually run in accordance with some plan (the discussion guide or topic guide: see Book 2), it is also typically driven by an understanding of the client's needs and the overall project objectives.

Here we touch upon the key defining characteristic of qualitative research; qualitative researchers adapt and adjust the approach as they

proceed in order to respond to and explore what emerges, as it emerges. In the ideal qualitative work, what structure there is, is designed to help things emerge. The ideal is that structure should never be applied too rigidly as this will inhibit or constrain what comes out. Fluidity and responsiveness are key aspects of the qualitative approach. Here there is a clear contrast with the more fixed character of quantitative research which poses precisely structured questions to generate a more numeric result; that is, straightforward 'question and answer' research.

There is a long and well-established tradition in academic as well as commercial research which recognises the virtue of the more fluid qualitative approach.

the field researcher is prepared to invent method on the spot; ... he [sic] views techniques – indeed whole methods – not only according to the generalised requirements of science but also to the requirements of his research problem and the properties of his particular research situation. (Schatzman and Strauss 1973: 8)

However, at the same time this celebration of fluidity may ring alarm bells. It smacks of the 'subjectivity' of which qualitative market research is often naively accused. Understanding the role and significance of qualitative market research both at a general level and in its specific application to brands and brand development requires the articulation of an epistemological basis for qualitative market research. Epistemology – the theory of knowledge – addresses issues that are in the realm of 'how can we claim to know what we know?' and 'what is the legitimacy of our method of knowledge production?'

Historically, the social sciences have often looked to natural science models to provide epistemological support. In the natural sciences models of the experimental method were at the core of the dominant paradigms of scientific practice in the twentieth century. Sir Karl Popper was one of the most important and influential philosophers of the twentieth century insofar as he, more than any other, articulated an epistemological base for the scientific method. In Popper's scheme, science advances its knowledge and understanding through experiment. The experimental process begins with the scientist developing an hypothesis, which may be rooted either in established or new theories about any order of things. A carefully controlled and repeatable experiment is then set up to test this hypothesis. The results of the experiment will then tend to do one of two things: either refute the hypothesis or fail to disprove it. In Popper's scheme science can never categorically claim to have proved anything, but what it can do is build up increasingly robust propositions that resemble a kind of 'best so far' knowledge. Fundamental within this is the proposition that this knowledge develops in a way that is transparent and can be questioned and challenged (and repeated) by other scientific practitioners (see, for example, Popper 1959).

Whilst Popper's scheme has been challenged as an account of how science works (see, for example, Kuhn 1970) the social sciences have often looked to some variation on this epistemological base as the foundation for what they do. The quest of some kind of quasi-scientific 'objectivity', to ground it in a 'positivistic' view, has been a significant part of the social science project, whether this is commercial market research or academic research.

In commercial survey research, ideas of hypothesis testing, the gathering of objective information and so on have been prominent. Beyond formal epistemological and theoretical discussion or debate, the reality of the commercial research world is that it is shot through with many assumptions rooted in this positivistic paradigm. For example, the idea of the sample survey is a mechanism, rooted in statistical theory, that allows us to identify with a given level of certainty the answers that would come from a whole population by asking questions of just a selected or sampled minority. Within the idea of the sample survey the concepts of reliability and validity are seen as central to social science epistemology (see, for example, Proctor 1993). *Reliability* in a survey means the ability of the methodology to produce the same results if repeated. The parallel goal of *validity* relates to the equally key requirement that we are actually measuring what we set out to measure.

It is interesting that qualitative research, as it is practised in Europe, almost by definition, fails to achieve some of the core requirements of these more positivistic views of social science. Qualitative research rarely sets up anything resembling a formal experiment conducted under controlled conditions which can be precisely repeated by others if they wish. The qualitative approach is at best 'wobbly' on the issue of reliability. Few practitioners would ever claim to or want to exactly replicate or imitate the approaches of others. Again, virtually all qualitative interviewers or moderators would say that any single interview is a unique and unrepeatable event. At these levels qualitative research falls short of some of the assumed and implicit tenets of the positivistic commercial and social research epistemology. However, in spite of this qualitative research continues to be a commercially viable vehicle, suggesting that at some level it presumably 'works'.

Underlying this apparent paradox is the truth that qualitative market research operates to a different set of epistemological rules, although these are rarely articulated within commercial research. Within the academic sector, however, these issues have been addressed through what has been labelled as the 'interpretive' approach, recognising that some varieties of approach have moved a long way from the kind of natural science epistemology outlined above (Rabinow and Sullivan 1979). Qualitative research exists not because it offers reliability, but because it addresses the fundamentally problematic issue of validity in survey research. Both the art (the craft skill) and the science of qualitative research are about trying to ensure validity; that we are examining what we think we are examining. Returning to the basic model of survey research outlined above, it is

clear that validity in survey research is unproblematic as long as a number of requirements are met:

- All questions that are asked are understood and interpreted exactly as intended.
- The respondent has access to 'the truth' and the ability to provide the whole truth in their response.
- The researcher understands the totality of response exactly as it was intended.

THE PROBLEM OF VALIDITY

The difficulty here is clear. The idea of validity in social survey research (the 'question and answer' model) is seriously compromised by a variety of problems.

The Problem of the Withheld

There is widespread recognition in all social science research that some people will not always want to answer all the questions we might put to them. This may be for a variety of reasons; they may be embarrassed about how their answers would be viewed, they may feel these are private areas, they may feel intruded upon, they may be bored, their minds may be on other things, they may dislike the research situation. For a whole variety of reasons people may 'resist' full, frank and honest responses. Once we accept the existence of this realm of 'the withheld' then we have the first problem of survey research. At its simplest, the logic of qualitative research is as a mechanism for exploring beyond the surface response to uncover what participants or 'respondents' do not want to be seen (see Chrzanowska, Book 2).

The Problem of the Unconscious

Beyond this there are many ways in which people also hide things from themselves, or are dishonest with themselves about the motives for their actions or they are unaware of these or blind to them. Therefore again, by definition, people cannot offer these things up as responses to questions. From Freud to the present day, the unconscious and invisible workings of the human mind have been a constant theme of psychology (see also Chapter 2). The moment we recognise the existence of motivations and influences that do not exist at an entirely conscious level, or the moment we recognise the lurking presence in the mind of 'information' that people do not have conscious or direct access to, then the idea of 'question and answer' research becomes problematic. Identifying 'what lies beneath' invites exploration, it invites the gradual peeling of layers below the conscious mind, it begs for mechanisms that will encourage what is hidden to become visible. It invites the development of something beyond

the fixed question which, by definition, is only likely to access a single layer of response, however well targeted this is.

The Problem of the Taken-for-Granted

As we have seen (in Chapter 2), human beings are social animals. Much of what underpins behaviour is learned, acquired, conditioned and so on, and is subsequently affirmed or adapted or changed through everyday interactive behaving. Much of this, in the normal course of events, never finds its way into conscious thought and therefore language; it is rarely 'put into words' but rather exists at a 'taken-for-granted' level. If we accept the existence of taken-for-granted and implicit meanings as a part of what moves human behaviour, then these very 'taken-for-granted' layers require identification and illumination through interviewing processes that are more complex and intricate than a direct objective question and objective response relationship.

The Hermeneutic Problem of Meaning

Almost by definition, research works primarily through the medium of language. Survey research works on the principle that if a specific question is asked it will be understood in the way that it was intended and the response to it will also be fully understood and appreciated by the questioner. But there are always problems with language in interviews: 'we may mistakenly assume that we have understood him [*sic*] and the error be small enough that it will not disrupt communication ...' (Becker and Geer 1971: 134).

In the academic world the assumption of unproblematic meaning has long been challenged by the hermeneutic school of philosophy. Here the argument runs that every human exchange involves movement between different individual systems of meaning with some degree of mis-translation potentially occurring at every exchange. Put simply:

the problem which hermeneutics poses can be defined by the question 'What can we make of the fact that one and the same message transmitted by tradition will, however, be grasped differently on every occasion, that it is only understood relative to the concrete historical situation of its recipient?' (Gadamer 1979: 35)

Any communication from A to B is precarious; A can never be sure that B has understood a communication exactly as intended and how 'far off' any interpretation has been.

In any survey, any specific question will not be interpreted/understood in the same way by all respondents. Their responses to it will be offered up from different orientations and rooted in different meaning structures. Ultimately, the hermeneutic problem can never be resolved in an absolute sense, but a hermeneutic method is required which is sensitive to this fundamental problem and addresses it. In practice much of the project of qualitative research is about identifying and clarifying meaning through

probing, cross-referencing, checking and so on. The project of qualitative research is a hermeneutic project.

The Problem of Prediction

The problem here is not so much whether we can have a predictive social science, but whether in participating in survey research respondents can provide accurate predictions about their behaviour in different settings at different points in time. Ultimately the goal of most research is to be predictive, but asking someone *what their behaviour would be* in some future scenario (let alone what a new brand or product should be like) is often problematic.

Questionnaire items which seek to measure values, attitudes, norms, and the like tend to ignore the emergent, innovational and problematic character of everyday life by imposing a deterministic 'grid' on it with its fixed-choice structure. (Cicourel 1964: 35)

People cannot simply predict the contexts in which their future behaviour will take place; they cannot predict with guaranteed accuracy their future mindsets, future feelings states, future cultural settings, future circumstance etc. This is a variation on Karl Popper's own argument that the epistemological basis for social science cannot be the same as that for natural science. Popper argues that since all social settings and situations at any point in time are unique, then the 'initial conditions' that are fundamental in his epistemological scheme for the scientific method in natural science can never be repeated (Popper 1957). Popper argues instead for what he calls *methodological individualism* in social science as a means of achieving understanding. The behaviour and actions of collectives 'must be reduced to the behaviour and to the actions of human individuals' (Popper 1957: 91). This practice of Popper's 'methodological individualism' bears a striking resemblance to some of what takes place in qualitative research.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH EPISTEMOLOGY

The problems outlined above are an invitation to qualitative research. These problems require an approach to understanding the human world that explores the nature and character of a person's own meaning systems and personal symbolic universe. It requires 'turning the analytic powers of semiotic theory ... away from an investigation of signs in abstraction towards an investigation of them in their natural habitat – the common world in which men look, name, listen, and make' (Geertz 1976: 1498).

These problems require that interviewers find many ways within any interview of verifying that what has been said or shown actually does reflect what the interviewer thought it initially reflected. These problems

require that any interviewer pursues all the layers of meaning that underpin any particular response.

These observations begin to come together to form an epistemological foundation for qualitative research. This foundation would involve a number of propositions:

- That what we study in the world of qualitative market research is *'the world as it is for us'*, i.e. as it is mediated through human perception. Within this we focus upon human meaning and human behaviour and see these as linked (although not in an inevitable or one-way relationship), so that human behaviour can in part be understood through the meanings associated with it.
- That human 'meaning' exists at a variety of levels: conscious, associative, repressed, unconscious, taken-for-granted and so on. The uncovering and elucidation of 'meaning' can never be a complete process, but this can be partly achieved through the approaches to interviewing and the techniques employed.
- That understanding what occurs in any given situation requires a 'methodological individualism' in which methods and approaches are specifically developed to address a specific problem.... We seek out an understanding of events in the human and social world through observation of, and encounters and discussion with the people who make up that world. We do not necessarily take what they do and say as the definitive explanatory account but we do:
 - Recognise human beings as the moving agents of history;
 - Recognise that no social tendency could not be altered if people decided consciously or intuitively to behave otherwise.
- This 'methodological individualism' is required at the overall level of the specific project and at the particular level of the individual interview, group and so on. It embraces an eclectic array of 'data': specific and general observation of behaviour, the orientations and responses witnessed in interviews, as well as what is actually said.
- Thus qualitative research is defined by its character as a hermeneutic method. The 'interview', the 'group', whatever the research vehicle is, is not seen as a device for generating individual and separate pieces of data, but is seen as a holistic web in which meanings and behaviours are cross-referenced and cross-checked against one another. This cross-referencing, probing and exploring are employed as mechanisms for affirming and refining what 'meanings' actually 'mean'.
- Ultimately qualitative research cannot be wholly predictive. The nature of the social world in which human beings act makes this logically impossible; generalisations from one set of responses to other situations and sets of human beings will always be flawed. However, if it can illuminate more of the world of associative, repressed, unconscious and taken-for-granted meanings that are linked with behaviour

then qualitative research can provide a more complete framework in which analytic 'what if' scenarios can be played out.

THE PROBLEM OF BRAND RESEARCH

These observations and this epistemological underpinning for qualitative research are perhaps most apposite when it comes to researching brands and developing brands through qualitative research.

Brands do not speak in English or French or German or even American. The language of brands is a kind of 'speaking in tongues'. When brand communications 'speak' to consumers it is in the language of brands; it is tonal; it is through association, through feeling, disposition and so on. Only some of this is made up of language, and even here the linguistic component may not be arranged in coherent paragraphs, sentences or phrases. When consumers 'listen' to brands it is again in the language of brands; it involves seeing, feeling, sensing and emoting, it may not involve anything resembling 'verbal thought'. Brands do not speak in English (etc.) although they may use it sometimes; people do not 'hear' and 'interpret' and 'negotiate' with brands in formal language with 'joined up' sentences.

The whole business of brand research is shot through with a sequence of hermeneutic problems. In responding to some question about Brand X the respondent has to first make their own interpretation of what the question 'means' in order to develop their response. Following this, the respondent then has to try to access their raft of experiences, orientations, feelings and so on about Brand X that are etched in memory (many of which have never been thought about or articulated) and somehow translate these into English (etc.) and articulate them to the researcher. The researcher then has to interpret what is being said by this respondent. When the researcher has interpreted enough accounts from enough respondents, they then go through another hermeneutic hoop telling their client what it all means. The client then has the task of developing strategy and tactics that need to be translated back into the language of brands.

This sequence of problems has been taken more or less seriously by commercial research. Qualitative research has generally taken a pragmatic approach to addressing the hermeneutic problem of the researcher–respondent interface and exchange. In the European tradition, qualitative research has generally tried to approach this problem by being sensitive to it, with the researcher trying to understand what the 'question' is that the respondent is actually answering:

I operate to a law of thirds ... a third of the time they react to the question I asked, a third of the time they're answering the question they think I've asked, a third of the time they're answering their own question, not mine ... there's nothing strange about it, it's how conversation is ... (Malcolm Scott, personal communication).

This issue is really the province of other titles in this series (see Book 2). The industry's solution to the hermeneutic problem of the researcher-client interface and exchange has been to rely upon the client working as a check upon the reasonableness of the findings and their interpretation. Within this there are clearly massive issues. However, these issues are general to research *per se* and not specific to branding research. The hermeneutic issue of the translation of research results is partly a problem for the research agency and partly a client problem. In particular, the issue of translation of strategy into brand communication is a creative one.

Above all, the central problem of researching brands is the hermeneutic problem of how the researcher can get meaningful and intelligible access to the consumer world of brands when this world is:

- comprised of 'bits' of memory and mental schemata that are 'recorded' as sensory impressions and only partly linguistic;
- more about feelings, visual images, tones and moods than 'joined up' language;
- more unconscious than conscious;
- more taken-for-granted than recognised;
- more rooted in dispositions and orientations than clearly articulated positions.

Here the flexibility, responsiveness and subtlety that qualitative research needs to get inside the meaning of a brand can be contrasted with some quantitative research. Wendy Gordon has noted, for example, that 'Attitude statement batteries on tracking studies, particularly demonstrate a complete lack of understanding of how to measure the values of a brand' (1996: 37). Much of the meaning that brands have for consumers remains implicit and unconscious. Much of the meaning that brands have is not organised into a readily accessible pattern, nor is it in any consistent format, but in particular much of it may not be in a linguistic form or a form that easily translates readily and directly into words. Much of the time consumers simply 'behave' in relation to brands; they rarely act in a fully conscious way and are rarely readily able to fully account for and describe their feelings and behaviour in relation to brands.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH AND THE WORLD OF BRANDS

The problem of brand research is an acute version of the problems of research outlined in the previous sections. To research brands we need approaches that can address:

- **The problem of the withheld:** by finding ways of identifying what consumers might not want to say about brands, what they would prefer to hide about how they use them, how they feel about them and so on.

- **The problem of the unconscious:** finding ways of allowing unconscious impressions of feelings and motivations about brands to come to the surface and find expression.
- **The problem of the taken-for-granted:** finding ways of revealing the taken-for-granted shared assumptions that are embedded in the everyday behaviour and practice that surround brands.
- **The hermeneutic problem of meaning:** finding ways of articulating the identity of any particular brand when that identity does not exist in a linguistic form, and managing the effective translation of meanings between difficult 'languages'.
- **The problem of prediction:** finding ways of identifying what emotional and psychological needs will be and how these might be addressed by a brand that does not yet exist.

As we argued in the previous section, all of these issues make branding research much more the province of qualitative research. The quantitative measurement of brands and brand equity is clearly desirable and to some degree achievable. Conjoint analysis, brand/price tradeoff, dual scaling conjoint analysis, and so on are examples of relatively sophisticated means of 'measuring' brands (Morgan 1993). However, because quantitative approaches by definition adopt a fixed focus and use fixed measures these cannot always explore the fine detail of what constitutes a particular brand to the level that may be appropriate in some instances. Equally, they are likely to be less suited to exploring for unmet, emerging or latent needs which new and existing brands could address, nor can they identify ways of addressing these.

Qualitative research is particularly suited to researching brands and aiding their development precisely because its whole project has been targeted at addressing the crucial problems outlined above. It begins to address some of these issues by virtue of its fundamental character as a hermeneutic method. Practised skilfully, it is a self-correcting mechanism. But beyond its basic hermeneutic character, qualitative research has also developed a wide variety of mechanisms to address the problems of brand research in different ways. In broad terms these can be divided into two territories:

- The overall way in which structural elements of research design can help unravel particular problems of brand research (see Chapter 6).
- The specific ways in which particular research techniques can be used within an overall structural framework to illuminate particular aspects of consumer motivation, brand identity and so on (see Chapter 7).

Before exploring these particular aspects of research methodology, some consideration of the role of research in brand evaluation and development processes is worthwhile (see Chapter 5).

KEY POINTS

- There is an implicit theory of knowledge underlying qualitative research and its specific application to brand research.
- By making this implicit theory of knowledge more explicit we can begin to see that the positivistic assumptions of a 'question and answer' approach to brand research have limitations.
- Qualitative research tries to offer a means of accessing things which might otherwise be 'withheld' by developing relationships of closeness and trust with respondents.
- Qualitative research attempts to address the problem of 'the unconscious' by probing beneath the surface in both the way it interviews and the techniques it uses.
- Qualitative research can illuminate the shared, taken-for-granted world of consumers by providing mechanisms that allow them to discover what is normally invisible in everyday life.
- Qualitative research addresses the hermeneutic problem of meaning by constant cross-referencing and cross-checking and by providing alternative 'languages' through research techniques.

5

Research and the Brand Development Process

In this chapter we move away from theorising about either brands or qualitative research and begin to focus specifically upon qualitative research and brand development. Here we review the various logical functions that need to be undertaken in any brand development process and suggest some key ways in which qualitative research can assist.

BRAND DEVELOPMENT SKILLS

In trying to build upon various written commentaries on brands and upon the assumptions that underlie how brands are treated and researched, we have argued that brands have their existence simultaneously at the level of the individual consumer, at the level of culture and at the level of marketing communications. Brands arise and develop out of an interaction and negotiation between these three areas. However, our primary means of access to what makes up a brand is through the psychological or micro-sociological level, i.e. through exploring what is present in the mind, orientation, assumptions, behaviour and so on of individuals and groups of people.

This chapter and those that follow will focus upon how qualitative research through its processes, methodologies and techniques can contribute to brand evaluation and development. This will comprise an exploration of the outline processes that are implied or required by the brand evaluation or brand development project and a cataloguing and explanation of different styles of approach and specific techniques:

- **Approaches:** in Chapter 6 we will look at the overall structuring and organisation of research, e.g. individual interview, pairs, trios, quads, micro/mini groups, focus groups, creative groups, workshops, continuous innovation, etc.
- **Specific techniques:** in Chapter 7 we will look at individual devices that can be employed that go beyond straightforward discursive interviewing: from techniques that work across a range of situations, to those that

are more specifically focused on identifying consumer 'needs' or the hidden identity of brands.

THE BRAND DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

In embarking upon any brand development process there are a number of overall issues that should be addressed. Essentially brand development can be seen as having to address five overall issues or areas. These can be seen as five key functions in the brand development process.

Identify Needs

In order to develop a strategy and tactics aimed at establishing or developing a new brand in the mind of the consumer it is first logically necessary to identify the total range of what are often termed 'needs' in a market. However, in using the term 'needs' we must be very careful to avoid the trap of defining this in a literal sense. When we talk about 'needs' in the current era we must include all the 'wants' and 'desires' that drive much of today's brand selections. Many so called 'needs' reflect neither a practical or material nor an emotional or psychological imperative; rather they reflect what the consumer wants or desires but can actually relatively easily do without. With this qualification in mind, this 'needs' evaluation should ideally include:

- Identification of the *practical* and *material* needs (wants and desires) of the consumer and how these vary between consumers and different groups of consumers. Alongside this, it is equally essential to identify the *emotional* and *psychological* needs (wants and desires) of consumers and how these relate to material/practical needs.
- Identification of needs should include not only of those needs that can be readily identified by consumers, i.e. those of which they are conscious, but also those which are *implicit* or *unconscious* or which are *developing* or *emerging* and, sometimes more importantly, those which are *latent* or *potential* needs within a marketplace, i.e. those which do not currently exist but could in some future scenario.

As a part of this process, there equally should be consideration and exploration of what a market could be, as well as where and what it is now. Here we are in the territory of identifying whether or not the existing boundaries and dimensions of a market could change.

Explore Existing Marketplace

Alongside this first process of 'needs' identification there is also a logical requirement to identify how and where existing brands and products cater to the 'needs' identified. Here we are in the territory of mapping out an existing marketplace:

- What is the current implicit *structure or shape of a market* and what dynamics are at play in that market, which will drive change in the future?
- What brands do consumers see as *key players* and how are these seen as relating to one another; what role does each play in the existing marketplace?
- How do consumers implicitly and explicitly *view different brands*; what are the points of identity and differentiation for each?
- How do these 'views' relate to *consumers' actual behaviour*?

Evaluate/Refine Brand/Product

It is equally logically necessary as a part of the brand development process to identify how and where the characteristics of an existing or new product can address needs:

- Perhaps by fulfilling *existing* practical demands at a more satisfactory level.
- Perhaps by offering to fulfil currently *unaddressed* or poorly addressed psychological, social or emotional needs, wants and desires.
- Perhaps by bringing to the surface needs, wants and desires that have previously been *latent* or, occasionally, by creating a *new* set of needs, wants or desires. A good example is the mobile phone: here it is arguable whether the desire for mobile communications amongst the vast majority of ordinary consumers was simply latent or did not exist prior to the invention; what is clear, however, is that it was not an overtly expressed need of the pre mobile phone generation.

Here it is often vitally important to make a realistic appraisal of how distinctive or original a core brand/product idea is. In this component of the planning/strategy development process some 're-shaping' of the product may be required to better adapt/adjust to and consequently fulfil consumer needs, wants and desires.

Identify the Meaning Set

In combination with these other dimensions, a fundamental element in the whole brand development process is identifying what might be called the 'meaning set' that relates to the total 'needs set' identified in function (1) above. Here research must seek to identify the ideas, values, imagery, associations, tones, moods, etc. that could potentially be attached to a new brand. This requires:

- First, the identification of the 'meaning set' relating to or implied by the total range of needs, wants and desires in the market.
- Next, the identification of the meaning set already taken up by or occupied by existing brands in the marketplace.

- Finally, identification of the meaning sets that could be potentially taken up by our new product/brand, and within this identification of the set that is most likely to motivate consumers to change their behaviour in a desirable fashion.

Create the Brand 'Model' or Blueprint

A further logical component in this brand development process is that of drawing together results from (1) to (4) above and out of these creating a model for the brand (see brand modelling, Chapter 3). What is learned from the exploration of the issues outlined above can serve as crucial inputs to the brand modelling process. Whilst there is no perfect model, the key point is that whatever model or approach is adopted this should be understood by and familiar to those who will be working with it. Here there is again a requirement to manage issues of intelligibility and depth/utility.

These five areas do not have to represent five stages of research, although there are circumstances in which each could be precisely that. It is more useful to see the above as five key functions that ought to be performed if we are to start developing a new brand with an enhanced potential for success or take an existing brand further forward. The enhanced potential arises from a brand strategy that has been guided by an understanding of the product's potential to address consumer needs and an understanding of the 'meanings' that it might be most appropriate to try to generate in brand communication.

Each of these five areas can be greatly assisted by research. Exploring needs, establishing brand identity and evaluating product fit is virtually impossible without significant input from research. Identifying meaning options and developing a brand model will often benefit from specifically tailored research input designed to assist a core team of marketers, communications experts, brand consultants and so forth. Without the input from research at the early stages of a brand's development, it will be very difficult to follow a clear and coherent strategy or to complete the functions that logically follow on from the development of a brand model, such as advertising and public relations.

Each one of the functional areas described above has its own distinct goals and purposes and each one raises its own specific set of issues. It is impossible to create a categorical research package which stipulates how research should be conducted in order to input into each of the above functions; every market situation has its own peculiarities, all brand circumstances are unique and even these will change over time. However, it is possible to review each of these functional areas and explore the range and style of research approaches and techniques that might be most useful at any stage.

BRAND EVALUATION VS. BRAND DEVELOPMENT

A functional process for brand development was outlined above. The issues that relate to each of these functional stages will be explored in the following sections of this chapter along with some indication of how research structure and research technique can assist. However, research focusing upon brands is not always necessarily concerned with brand development. Here some distinction is often drawn between research that has the purpose of *developing an entirely new brand* and research focused upon *evaluating the current standing of a particular brand*. The former represents perhaps the most complete case of brand development research, whilst the latter represents the most clearly delineated case of brand evaluation research.

Pure brand evaluation research, i.e. the evaluation of an established brand within a marketplace and its needs for further development, implies a *different structure and different prioritisation* of the same five key functions outlined above.

Identifying Needs

In order to provide a true evaluation of a brand situation it will be vital to have a full appreciation of the total range of needs, wants and desires within a market. As with brand development research, this ideally needs to incorporate current conscious and unconscious material needs as well as emotional and psychological needs. Beyond this, we can only guard the future security and development of the brand if we also have an understanding of the developing, emerging, latent or potential needs within a marketplace. Likewise, the future security of our brand can also only be guarded if we have an appreciation of how the marketplace could change its boundaries and dimensions in the future. A real danger in brand evaluation research is that of failing to take this broader view so that we can predict and pre-empt the future erosion of our brand.

Exploring the Existing Marketplace

In brand evaluation research the key function that needs to be performed is the identification of how and where existing brands and products fit within a marketplace. Here our key purpose is to identify, as before, the brands that are seen as key players in the market and how each of these is implicitly and explicitly viewed. Specifically, here there is an obvious requirement to develop the fullest possible portrait of our own brand.

Evaluating and Refining the Product

Within brand evaluation research this component is less vital than is usually the case with brand development research, but it nevertheless remains important. Here it is important to understand whether the product continues to be as salient as it once was. It is vital to see whether changing needs or a changing competitive set have shifted the way in which a

product is regarded. The issues are whether some product refinement or development is required, whether some compensating activity is needed as a way of making up for a relative decline in performance or whether there is a need to somehow reorientate consumer views and expectations of our own product or products.

Identifying the Meaning Set

Again, this functional area may be less crucial in brand evaluation research than in brand development research. Typically, in brand evaluation research this function would rarely be seen as requiring or deserving its own dedicated research project. Identifying the total range of ideas, values, imagery, associations, tones, moods and so on that could exist in a marketplace would be seen as an unnecessary luxury. Insofar as issues such as these are explored in brand evaluation research this is usually by extrapolating these out of the images and associations attached to existing brands within the market. However, it is worth stressing here that this is an invitation to missed opportunity. Again, adopting a stance in brand evaluation research that looks well beyond the boundaries of our own brand and asks questions about the total range of possibilities in a marketplace does offer the opportunity of finding some new thread of possibility.

Adapting the Brand Model

Brand development research leads towards the construction of some form of brand model to guide strategy and communication aimed at building the brand within the world of the consumer. By contrast, brand evaluation is about building two brand models or blueprints; the first is a depiction of what the brand actually is out there in the marketplace at present, the second is a depiction of what the brand strategically aspires to be. Crucially, brand models or blueprints need to be adapted and changed to reflect the changing world in which they operate.

Thus, these five functions remain a logical part of brand evaluation research. Whilst the relative priorities shift and hence the relative focus of research effort and depth of research technique required may change, nevertheless brand evaluation and brand development research continue to have far more uniting them than separating them.

To a significant degree this absolute distinction between brand development research and brand evaluation research is artificial. In practice pure brand evaluation research rarely occurs. The idea of pure brand evaluation research implies research conducted for academic interest with no other motive. In practice, evaluating the current standing of any brand will usually have some further underlying motive: for example, to see if the brand is 'losing ground' at a psychological, emotional or image level; to identify whether there are unexploited opportunities for developing or 'leveraging' the brand in some way; to identify whether the brand is under threat, and so on. All of these suggest an element of the 'developmental'.

Thus, it is more realistic to talk about all research focused on brands as being developmental in character, but with some far more developmental than others.

IDENTIFYING CONSUMER AND MARKET NEEDS

The identification of consumer needs is one of the most fundamental and potentially problematic areas in brand research. In identifying consumer needs, whether for the development of a new brand or for the maintenance of an established brand, it is essential that research moves beyond what consumers can currently tell us about their 'needs'. The consumers' own account of their needs only relates to those which they have actually thought about and identified for themselves, i.e. those needs, wants and desires which they consciously recognise as being fulfilled by existing brands or areas of evident failure amongst existing brands. Griffiths argues that we need to start the process of branding by identifying consumer dissatisfaction with the product choices available because if there is no dissatisfaction there will be no switching (Griffiths 1992). However, whilst this is clearly a good starting point it leaves entirely unaddressed a variety of different areas; it leaves a whole realm of emotional and psychological needs which are simply not consciously recognised by the consumer, a whole realm of latent or potential needs which are outside of the consumer's current frame of conscious or unconscious reference.

Within the UK beer market of the 1990s, Budweiser in its long-necked bottle format was one of the key brands which led a movement away from drinking beer (lager) in draft format, i.e. pint glasses, towards drinking beer from the (usually lower volume) bottle in pubs. This revolutionary change involved consumers spending considerably more cash per unit volume of beer. The shift was possible because Budweiser, in its long-necked variant, allowed consumers to do two key things that had previously been unavailable. First, consumers could now use their beer bottle as a visible sign of brand badging – *'I am drinking Budweiser, I am cool'*. The Budweiser long-necked bottle implicitly conjured up images of urban youth 'drinking beer from the bottle on the hood of a Chevy'. Secondly, this change allowed them to be less tied to drinking large volumes of beer in a drinking session. Prior to the establishment of the premium bottled sector neither of these drinking needs was apparent from any consumer discussion of what 'lads' said they wanted from drinking; consumers did not say *'I want to pay more money for less beer so that I can pose'*. Most consumers did not consciously know that they would one day like to make a fashion statement when drinking beer and would one day enjoy drinking less beer but paying more for it.

This case illustrates the key problem research faces in endeavouring to assist in needs identification. Research has to find ways of allowing consumers to go beyond their current cultural thinking, to identify for

themselves some of the currently unrecognised limitations and problems within a market place, or to provide cues whereby careful analysis of data can reveal hidden or potential needs. Moreover, research should also be humble and recognise that it will often be the creative 'leaps' of others that translate a vague set of cues into a positive and workable proposition that subsequently brings latent or potential needs to the surface.

Here it is useful to conceive of what we have characterised as 'needs research' as existing at two distinctive levels:

- **Market needs:** a broad exploratory level at which research endeavours to deconstruct a whole marketplace in all of its psychological and cultural glory in order to identify opportunities, weaknesses, underlying conflicts and contradictions.
- **Consumer needs:** a specific motivational level at which research seeks to identify and refine the key motivational entry points or triggers which can 'work' for a brand in development in a given market at a given historical point.

Research to identify needs at the 'market' level implies a whole raft of different research approaches; the more specific identification and refinement of key motivators implies a more specific set of techniques.

There is a variety of ways in which the actual structure of qualitative research might assist in identifying 'needs' at what we have described as the broad exploratory 'market' level. Establishing existing and potential market needs in particular requires that the research issues are approached from as many different angles as possible. Thus, for example, approaches that use mixed methodologies employing both group and individual approaches can be beneficial. Particularly valuable here can be extended duration groups or interviews that simply allow a wider variety of techniques to be employed (see the discussion of logistics in Chapter 6). Market needs research, in particular, can be helped by *moving beyond the conventional*. In this connection a variety of less conventional formats has been developed over time, which attempt to involve either the client or the consumer or both more intimately in the research process. Here the objective is more sophisticated consumer input into research and/or a more sophisticated take-out by the client and brand development team (see the discussion of involvement or interface research in Chapter 6).

Likewise, a range of qualitative research techniques can be of value in the process of identifying underlying specific consumer needs. Here a number of general techniques have application but beyond this others, such as gaming, brand contracts, truth games and others, have particular value (see Chapter 7).

That there is a requirement to develop brands that have some grounding in what we have labelled 'consumer' needs and a requirement to establish the key motivational entry points which a brand can utilise, is easily illustrated by many examples. For instance, parents of young

children are clearly motivated to protect their babies/infants from nappy rash and to somehow 'treat' this where it occurs, but the emotions and motivations involved are complex rather than simple. These might include: a desire to preserve the baby's 'health', protection of the baby from pain and discomfort, preservation of an aura of 'cleanliness' surrounding the baby, or preservation of an aura of 'normality' around the baby. In a sense all of these will be true for many parents in many situations. However, some will be more powerful than others, some will be relevant more often than others, some will be more true for some groups or types of consumer than others. The point here is that a brand attempting to touch upon a 'baby health' motivation rather than a 'restoration of normality' motivation will need to project a distinctive set of messages with a distinctive tone of voice, style and imagery, implying a distinctive user image and so on.

Wendy Gordon has addressed this area by emphasising the complexity of 'need.states' within any individual consumer, with different need.states resulting in different brand selections from the same consumer: 'The flexibility of your behaviour depends on an unconscious identity that you adopt for that moment of purchase' (Gordon 2001: 12). Understanding market needs means mapping out the totality of these need.states. Similarly, these core 'consumer' needs and motivations do not necessarily need to have an absolutely fixed and absolutely timeless character, although motivators identified should be relatively firm and solid. These will have some grounding or base in factors of human personality, identity or culture.

A further key issue which has early pertinence in the brand development process is that of segmentation. Here segmentation refers to the overall process of dividing all of the consumers within a particular market place according to 'type'. Here typologies may be built on a variety of different bases. Typologies may be purely demographic, based on class or occupational segments. They may be based on behaviour patterns, say different patterns of shopper, or driver, or drinking behaviour and so on. They may be based on attitudes, for example, differing perspectives on healthy eating or different attitudes towards fashion. Finally, segmentations can be rooted in 'psychographics', the creation of a detailed and comprehensive portrait of consumer types which are both behavioural and attitudinal. This type of segmentation became very popular during the 1990s as a means of defining and characterising audiences in a way that often brought them to life quite vividly. Commonly referred to behavioural types such as 'early adopters' or 'followers' are examples of a behavioural segmentation which focused upon the relative propensity to take up new brands or products. Commonly used labels like 'empty nesters' (couples whose children have left home) or 'dinkys' (dual income no kids yet) are examples of sociographic segmentations in which dimensions of disposable income come to the fore. Alternatively, terms like the 'grey' or 'pink' consumers suggest more focus upon life stage or lifestyle.

The key point about segmentation is that the issue of 'needs' is no longer universal and generalised; it is specific and targeted. Segmentation in effect means asking questions like 'What are the needs of this particular group of consumers?' or 'Are there any groups of people in this market whose real needs are not met?' or 'What do people like this really need?'

EXPLORATION OF THE MARKETPLACE

Markets are made up of brands, thus a crucial part of any brand development process and the central part of all brand evaluation processes, is the exploration of what we may call 'brand identity'. Here we are concerned with identifying the associations, images, sensations, feelings, orientations, values, meanings, ideas and so on, which come together to make up the totality of a brand. Here we are interested in those elements and clusters of elements which are shared by all or most consumers in a marketplace and which seem to be more the province of particular groups and sub-groups of consumers. Similarly, we are interested in the dynamics that appear to be present within the marketplace. However, whilst the researcher may be interested in this, little or none of this has centre stage in the consumer's world-view, or will have been consciously thought about and thought through. Much of it is simply too trivial for detailed conscious deliberation.

Again, there are countless examples that could illustrate this. For instance, Olivio is a brand that has achieved considerable recent success in the UK spreads market. This success appears to have been built largely upon an advertising campaign focused around themes of Mediterranean lifestyle and longevity. Here, advertising has encouraged consumers to build their own brand identity for Olivio by providing them with story lines which tap into rich, deep and broad sets of associations that already exist in consumer culture. These include images of a pastoral golden age, rich and deep associations attached to rural Italy, images of a happy, contented peasantry, and so on. Yet, none of this rich imagery and complex network of associations is particularly profound, it is not central to the world-view of consumers, it is rarely something they will talk about with others at all, and yet with prompting and probing it can be made to surface. The point is that much of what the Olivio brand taps into or references is not immediately or readily visible.

In other markets we can see different illustrations of the difficulty of accessing what drives consumer behaviour. Barclays, Lloyds TSB, Abbey National and a whole host of other banking and financial institutions exist, in contrast to Olivio, as a part of the environmental fabric which most consumers have grown up with. Impressions, feelings and images of these institutions have been built up over a long period of time. They have been built up out of the hearsay of others and out of past experiences, many of which are now long forgotten. Moreover, the anxieties, uncertainties and insecurities that surround financial matters combined with

desires to be seen to be rational in the decision-making process often lead consumers to obscure or deny the emotional factors which influence them. Thus, there is a range of problems that need to be tackled if research is to produce valuable answers, including the latent, hidden or taken-for-granted nature of much imagery, consumer denial of the emotional, the consumer tendency to obfuscate and so on.

Qualitative research has spent considerable time developing approaches and techniques to address the type of problems outlined above. At the 'structural level' there has been considerable debate over the most appropriate means of getting inside the consumer mind in respect of brand identity. Some have argued the benefits of individual interviewing. Here, the theory is that a therapeutic environment and the use of a variety of techniques to successively 'peel back the layers' of what a brand is about offers the opportunity of creating a highly detailed account of a particular brand identity as it exists for a particular consumer (see, for example, Supphellen 2000). In contrast to this, there is an equally powerful argument in favour of group-based research. This argues that where sufficient time is available (in, for example, extended groups) a variety of techniques can be used both individually and by the group to illuminate the shared and taken-for-granted dimensions of a brand identity (see Chapter 6).

One thing that is clear from both of these arguments; that there are benefits arising from moving beyond the interview formats that have been 'standard' in the UK, and elsewhere, in the 1980s and 1990s. The 1½ hour group discussion or the 1 hour depth interview is, ironically, a product of the 'taken-for-granted' world of the researcher rather than what is necessarily desirable or appropriate in any given situation.

In particular, the exploration of brand identity lends itself to and indeed demands (Gordon 1999) the use of research techniques that go *beyond purely verbal* discussions. What is required here are mechanisms that allow consumers to somehow articulate the character of a brand that is implicit in their orientations towards it. Equally, there is a requirement for mechanisms that allow consumers to express elements of brand identity that do not exist in a structured linguistic form; they need to be given ways of speaking about brands in something more akin to 'brand language'. Here qualitative research can offer a whole battery of techniques aimed at illuminating brand identity (see Chapter 7).

PRODUCT EVALUATION AND REFINEMENT

Ultimately, any brand identity remains in part rooted in the product or service that it represents. At its best, good branding and positive communication of branding can help the consumer better understand a product, view a product in a way that is more useful to them, appreciate its better properties and so on. From this point of view, it is perfectly clear that a

product will place constraints upon effective branding and will influence the nature of the brand as it develops in the consumer world. Here the issues that need to be addressed are: how does the nature of the product limit the possible brand identity that can develop and what directions or opportunities for brand development are provided by the nature of the product?

Again some examples are useful, and the case of Budweiser cited earlier is interesting. The failure of Budweiser in the UK market for some considerable time after its launch resulted from a combination of two basic characteristics: its American heritage (even if brewed under licence in the UK) and its 'lighter' taste in contrast with most European premium lagers. Without a framework for interpreting these characteristics positively most consumers could only look at the brand and their experience of it as a disappointment. Early advertising affirmed their dominant impressions of American culture as loud, brash, shallow and insubstantial. In this situation the product experience of Budweiser's 'lighter' character was of a weak, tasteless beer. Once the presentation of the brand allowed consumers to recognise a different and more 'authentic' version of America in Budweiser, the product increasingly came to be seen as cool, refreshing, easy and accessible – 'not heavy'.

The world of personal finance can also be used to illustrate how products can constrain brands. Through the 1980s and 1990s many banks and financial institutions in the UK identified that substantial numbers of consumers felt distant from these institutions. Banks were seen as exploitative, big, bureaucratic, uncaring. At various times many of these institutions undertook advertising campaigns in an attempt to present the image that consumers wanted to see – a caring, helpful, friendly and responsive bank. The problem for many of these banks was a clear dissonance between advertising messages on the one hand and consumers' everyday experiences and deep-rooted beliefs on the other. Consumers just did not 'buy' the idea of a friendly bank.

Here the brand development process confronts a somewhat different set of problems. Insofar as consumer needs have been identified and insofar as research can identify the extent to which those needs are served by the current marketplace, the evaluation of products against those needs both analytically and through exposing them to consumers is reasonably unproblematic. However, what is often considerably more problematic is getting client 'buy-in' to the possibility that some re-shaping of the elements of a product or service offering may be needed, or acceptance of the limitations and constraints that a product places on what can usefully and meaningfully be communicated about it.

Here there are some issues that need to be addressed in terms of how products and product concepts are presented to consumers. Equally significant here is a variety of issues in terms of how clients and their agents can be more actively involved in or integrated into the qualitative research process itself. All of these emphasise the importance of some

structural elements in the qualitative research process. Particularly important here are two aspects: research agency involvement and consultation in the design of stimulus material and the input of others into the research process, including real integration of client personnel (see Chapter 6).

IDENTIFYING MEANING SETS

The identification of what we might call ‘meaning sets’ is a crucial function in the brand development process. Here there is a clear sequence of needs. Ideally this process must first take the existing range of consumer needs in a market (existing, unconscious, latent and potential) and identify the universe of meanings (imagery, language, tone etc.) that might apply to those needs. Thus, for example, having established what banks are, in good and bad terms, and what they might be, we need to identify and understand the imagery, tonality, language, tone of voice and so on which could reflect or express all of this. Here the requirement is not just for a single meaning set, but for a number of such sets. As a second step in this process there is a need to identify how existing brands in the marketplace have used or taken ownership of any of these territories of meaning. Do some meanings, images, tones of voice etc., belong more to one brand than another? Finally this process needs to identify a set of meanings, images, tones of voice etc. that can be taken up by our new brand or integrated into an existing brand and which will motivate consumers to behave appropriately toward that brand.

Here, the example of Lila Pause cited earlier (Griffiths 1992) is instructive. The failure of Lila Pause to break into the UK market in spite of strong launch and marketing support can be seen as in part the product of a failure to provide a new meaning set relating to consumers’ existing or potential needs.

Addressing this key function requires research to bring together the elements employed in needs research and brand research in order to identify how and where needs can be addressed through brand meaning. Here a range of techniques based on ‘brand language’ can be used to identify the imagery, associations and language which in some way reflects the range of consumer needs in a marketplace. From here the goal becomes that of identifying how different brands currently lay claim to different values, images and so on, and thence identifying what could be exploited by our own brand. For an account of a range of these brand language-based techniques, see Chapter 7.

THE BRAND MODEL OR BLUEPRINT

The idea of a brand model can be seen as a blueprint that is aimed at guiding and nurturing the future development of a brand. The creation of a

model to guide the development of any brand is an analytic and intellectual exercise that screams out for input from qualitative research. Construction of a brand model employing any of the particular approaches outlined in Chapter 3 requires some knowledge of consumer perceptions and attitudes, some analysis of market structure and dynamics, and so on. The point is that processes of brand modelling need to be fed by qualitative research focused on consumer needs, brand perceptions, brand identity, brand refinement and meaning sets.

Typically, where formal processes of brand modelling occur these involve inputs from many of the above elements. Sometimes this is a process concentrated into a short and intensive period of time. In other instances, where time allows, the process can be longer, involving many months of careful analysis, consideration and checking. Occasionally the process can run into years rather than months.

Brand modelling is a process that can be directly assisted by research. In various instances specific qualitative research projects can be set up to explore, identify or test specific elements within any one brand model. Projects may be set up, for instance, to identify and refine those consumer truths which are most appropriate as a foundation for the development of a new brand, whether a shampoo or insurance product.

The techniques appropriate to the development and evaluation of brand models will depend upon where the key area of focus is. In instances where the focus is upon the *market environment* then the whole range of elements identified earlier as pertinent to needs research may have a role, including most general techniques as well as diaries, gaming, brand contracts and truth games. Where the focus of interest is upon identifying *imagery, values and personality*, then the raft of brand language techniques which are available become more appropriate. Where the focus of interest is upon brand model areas such as *substantiators, positioning or brand contract*, then some of those techniques focused more upon brand relationship can have particular use, and where it is upon identifying *key consumer truths or motivations*, these can often emerge from an analysis of responses to a whole range of techniques, but a few focus more specifically upon this, namely brand contract, truth games, diaries and behavioural modification (all these techniques are discussed fully in Chapter 7).

Finally, it is important to note that in research that is aimed at assisting the development of a brand model the issues are not simply about techniques or content. Here issues to do with the *structure of research* (discussed in Chapter 6) can also be very important. Where group discussion settings are used, then smaller groups (five or six respondents) can often allow more detailed exploration of different nuances; equally, longer duration groups can allow more detailed exploration of specific issues. Sampling can also be an issue here; most obviously this is about ensuring that the outputs from research reflect the right target audience, but other factors such as creativity and a willingness to play or experiment can make the difference between more and less useful respondents. Perhaps most

important in research aiding the development of brand models is the opportunity afforded by the various forms of what can be described as 'involvement research'. Here there can be few substitutes for a brand team that has had some 'close up' experiences with consumers and has worked with consumers in the refinement of elements of an overall brand model.

KEY POINTS

In contrast with simple brand evaluation, the brand development process can be aided by qualitative research in a variety of key ways:

- To identify existing and potential 'needs' within a market place.
- To identify how and where existing brands and products address or fail to address these needs.
- To identify the ways in which brands and products can be refined, reframed or represented to more directly address the needs identified.
- To identify how and where brand meanings need to be and can be developed to address market needs.
- To help develop some form of brand model to direct the communication strategy for a brand.



The Structure of Brand Research

This chapter explores how the way in which research is structured can impact upon its results. Here we explore the implications of different aspects of structure for qualitative brand research: whether research is done through groups or depths, various timing and logistical issues, issues of sampling, issues of client involvement and issues of stimulus material.

METHODOLOGY AS STRUCTURE

In the initial chapters we looked at what brands are and the way in which they come into being in the individual mind and consumer culture through interaction with brand communication. Subsequently, we explored how the process of brand modelling can act as a guide to brand communication. From this point we began to look at how qualitative research is peculiarly suited to taking us inside the world of brands, both at a theoretical level and at a more practical level in terms of different key functions in the brand development process. Now we have reached the point where we can look at some of the specifics of how qualitative market research can access the consumer world of brands and through this evaluate where a brand is now and plan its development.

The problem of accessing the consumer world of brands concerns methodology. On the one hand it is about how researchers structure their overall research approaches. On the other hand it is about what researchers do with consumers to get access to this world of brands, i.e. methodology as technique.

In this chapter we will deal with the first of these areas – how research is structured. Exploring ‘methodology as structure’ needs to address, understand and organise how research structure can be employed to help access and explore the world of brands. Here we encounter some of the issues that are perennial in all of qualitative market research. Should it be group discussions or in-depth interviews? How many sessions and how long? Then there are further issues of sampling, and finally the nagging doubt that there must be some other way. In confronting these issues there are still no right and wrong answers. All of these issues remain ‘live’ for every brand evaluation project and every brand building project. They imply sets of questions that should be asked as projects are being designed.

GROUPS VS. DEPTHS

Current practice in the UK is for the large majority of qualitative market research work to be conducted either through group discussions or in-depth interviews. Group discussions can involve anything from four respondents upwards, most commonly seven or eight. The respondents are led by a moderator (researcher) through a discussion lasting anything from 45 minutes upwards, most often 1½ or perhaps 2 hours. In-depth interviews involve a single interviewer and single respondent and last anything from 30 minutes upwards, most commonly around 1 hour. Between 'the group' and 'the depth' there are also of course 'paired depths' (diad interviews), or trios (triad interviews), micro groups, mini groups and so on. Any of these structures has its own particular benefits and limitations. But the key substantial debate about structure in qualitative market research is about the virtues of group discussions (focus groups or 'groups') versus the virtues of one-to-one interviews (in-depth interviews, individual depth interviews or 'depths'). Whilst this debate is more the province of other books in this series (see Chrzanowska, Book 2), some dimensions of this debate have particular relevance to brand and brand development research.

The standard arguments in the 'groups vs. depths' debate revolve around a number of areas. At a practical level, groups allow the moderator access to the responses of a greater number of consumers per unit of the moderator's time. This 'exposure' argument clearly has its downside in the fact that greater numbers must also mean less opportunity for any individual respondent to talk in detail. More significantly, the case for group-based approaches also often focuses upon the interactive character of the group; consumers can 'spark off' one another, responding to and developing what other people have said in a way that is not possible in a one-to-one situation. In this respect, the group environment itself acts as a tool that encourages additional 'information' or insights to emerge that might not emerge in a one-to-one situation. Likewise, the interactive character of the group also enables it to be more creative, generating new possibilities out of the 'electricity' of interaction. Where the goal of research is the identification and development of new brand identities, the 'interactive' and hence 'creative' aspect of groups may often make them more appropriate.

One of the strongest arguments in favour of group-based approaches relates to the techniques they allow the moderator to use. One of the dominant themes of this book has been the argument that brands exist primarily in realms *outside* of conscious and reasoned thought and rational language. This theme is either implicit or explicit amongst virtually all commentators on brands. In this scenario it is entirely logical to argue that some special tools are required to go beyond what is immediately conscious and articulable. The next chapter of this book will be devoted to an exploration and elaboration of a whole realm of

qualitative research techniques which have been developed to access (or at least provide glimpses into) this hidden or obscured world. Traditionally these techniques have been colloquially labelled as 'projective and enabling techniques'. Whilst many of these techniques can be applied in one-to-one situations, it has often been felt that these are easier to employ in group situations and, indeed, some techniques specifically require a group environment. Here the group setting can provide a more secure and less exposed environment for respondents when they are asked to perform what, on the face of it, may seem unusual tasks. Similarly, the group situation allows the option of asking respondents to perform tasks in pairs or teams, thus allowing them to undertake tasks in a mutually supportive way and creating the possibility that tasks benefit from creative interaction.

Perhaps the most compelling argument for the use of a group environment for either the elaboration of current brand identity or the development of new or potential brand identity is the proposition that brands are fundamentally *cultural* in their nature. In exploring the identity of any particular brand we are less interested in the particular and peculiar idiosyncrasies of any individual consumer's perception of that brand. Individual perceptions are only interesting and relevant insofar as they reflect something that is either shared with others or held in common with others. Individual perceptions are important to us only insofar as they reflect something that exists at a wider cultural level (Chandler and Owen 1989). By its very nature the group discussion is also a social or cultural event. Here the fact that 'results' are negotiated between the participants is not problematic, it is precisely why group discussions are valuable; they provide a means of accessing shared meanings and taken-for-granted assumptions and provide a forum in which individual idiosyncrasies can be sifted out. At a more practical level, it is also true that the collective and cultural character of the group significantly reduces the possibility of moderators 'leading' respondents.

Strong arguments in favour of the 'depth interview' have also been put as a part of this overall debate. In contrast to group situations, depth interviews offer an in-depth encounter with a consumer whereas any group situation allows relatively little time to explore what individual attitudes, feelings and experiences really are. The crudest calculations allow us to say that a one-to-one interview allows eight times as much time focused on the individual respondent as a group discussion of the same duration with eight respondents. While it is obviously ridiculous to try to apply a precise mathematics like this, the point is nevertheless clear; groups can often compromise individual focus.

The virtues of the depth interview are not solely about time focus. Particularly compelling here has been the proposition that the depth interview is far more appropriate when evaluating how consumers are likely to *interpret communications*. Here the argument runs that since most communications are received and processed at an individual level and

that there may be wide variation in the way in which different consumers process the same messages, the group discussion is a very artificial environment in which to examine the reception and interpretation of such messages (see, for example, Branthwaite and Swindells 1995b).

Thus far, the strongest argument for one-to-one interviews appears to be in situations where we need to understand how possible communications are likely to be interpreted or where we need considerable focus upon the individual respondent. Magne Supphellen (2000) has made a strong case arguing precisely this last point. Out of her review of the operation of mind and memory, she suggests that traditional focus groups may be less appropriate for eliciting brand associations because of problems of self-censoring and inadequate time to delve into individual chains of association. From this she draws a number of conclusions for method and technique. These amount to an outline for what we might call a **'brand portrait interview'**:

- Multiple techniques should be used because some will be better at drawing out hidden associations, others better at allowing verbalisation and others better at avoiding censoring.
- Techniques should include at least one visual technique, and these should be used before verbal techniques that might 'frame' how visuals were seen.
- Techniques should include at least one 'object-projective' technique (describing the brand as a car, animal, fabric, personality etc.).
- Interviewers should also use 'person-projective' techniques where the respondent reports associations from the perspective of some group of which they are a member, e.g. 'most teenagers'.
- Interviewers should use real stimuli where possible: drink the coffee, show the pack, see the logo, listen to the jingles etc.
- Interviewers should probe for secondary associations using primary associations as start points, e.g. 'What do you associate with quality?', so that they can snowball a chain of associations.
- Interviewers should probe from brand situations, i.e. encourage the respondent to free associate around the brand whilst focused upon, for example, a usage situation.
- Interviewers should avoid directly questioning respondents' emotions, but rather use pre-defined lists of emotions to simplify respondents' task in finding words to express their feelings.

Although Supphellen (2000) argues these points in connection with one-to-one interviews, they provide equally valid guidance for group sessions. Here many practitioners would argue that many or all of the elements and guidance outlined by Supphellen can be accommodated within various forms of group situation, provided these work within a sufficiently broad time window. In these situations the group can provide the added benefits of group interaction and mutual stimulation, along

with the check or challenge of the group's more cultural reference point. Here we have an outline for the **brand identity forum**, a group-based variant of the brand portrait interview.

Ultimately the arguments arrayed above may show some favour to group situations as mechanisms for exploring many brand issues, but there may be instances in which the particular benefits of one-to-one interviews come to the fore. Undoubtedly the 'groups versus depths' debate will continue. The key point in all of this is that in designing research to explore particular issues and meet particular goals we need to be sensitive to the issues involved and the particular needs of the situation. Once again Karl Popper's methodological individualism anticipates this key dimension of qualitative research. The issue to be resolved in any instance is whether the beneficial aspects of groups or depths (or pairs or trios etc.) are most suited to our particular needs at any point in time.

LOGISTICS

Designing brand research is not simply about deciding whether groups or depths are more appropriate. A whole variety of logistical issues relating to time frame and respondent participation are also relevant here. Within this, time frame issues go well beyond the length or duration of group discussions or depth interviews, although this in itself is a significant issue.

The dominant time frames employed in qualitative research in the UK have become almost enshrined in the proposition that a group discussion lasts 1½ hours and a depth interview 50–60 minutes. The fact that there are different traditions in different countries suggests that there is nothing inevitable about this, it is merely the way that research has evolved to accommodate some of the practicalities of the UK's business and cultural situations. The problem here is that neither of these mechanisms is particularly well suited to brand evaluation or brand development research.

Magne Supphellen (2000) makes a strong case that a one-to-one interview designed to truly identify the breadth, depth and character of brands in a marketplace requires more time than is afforded within a 50 minute or 1 hour interview. Getting inside an individual consumer's own system of needs, wants and priorities, establishing their confidence and trust, getting a feel for how they use language, their reference structures and applying a range of techniques to explore and illuminate different brand identities, takes more time than is afforded by a 1 hour time slot.

In broad terms the same argument applies to the idea of a 1½ hour group discussion focused on brand evaluation or brand development. The classic British discussion group or focus group involving eight respondents and lasting 1½ hours is a vehicle that from the outset is pressed for time. A group discussion requires at least 10 minutes in which

to introduce the subject, to explain respondent rights and for respondents to introduce themselves. This would then allow each respondent 10 minutes to talk about how they feel, for example, about brands in the financial services market or all of their formative experiences in the world of fast food. Of course, this is not how group discussions do or should work, but again it does illustrate the point.

Although the 1½ hour group discussion has been the dominant form in qualitative market research in the UK, it has not been the only form. Over time a variety of different time frames and formats has been developed to counter the limitations of the short and sweet focus group. In the 1970s Peter Cooper coined the term 'Extended Creativity Group', to describe a 2½ to 3 hour duration research group whose focus was the application of a sequence of 'projective and enabling' techniques designed to penetrate deeper into the consumer mind and the consumer psyche. Following on from such approaches, a variety of different group-based research formats has been developed. At the extreme these can involve whole day research workshops, or even weekend workshops, in which groups of respondents have an extended time opportunity in which to work through a whole series of market and brand evaluation exercises and in which to launch into exploration of 'blue sky' scenarios. At the lesser extreme, recognition of the limitations of the 1½ hour group has encouraged greater use of 2 hour duration research groups which can be conducted in pairs, back to back, in an evening, or through the course of a day as necessary.

Again the point here is not that there is some ideal time solution to the problem of brand and brand development research, but merely that it is an issue. Proper exploration of the structure of a marketplace and brand identities within it, i.e. brand evaluation research, is not something that can be meaningfully completed in a 1½ hour focus group with eight respondents. Equally the same applies to issues of needs research and brand development research. All of these require the creation of a sense of relaxed trust and understanding within a group of respondents. There is also a requirement for the development of a purposeful sense of co-operation and the use of a variety of qualitative research techniques (see Chapter 7), both to create this bonding and to generate the information required.

As an adjunct to this whole discussion of the time duration it is also worth noting that there are also issues to do with numbers here. The classic British pattern has been that a group comprises eight respondents. However, there is nothing magical about the number eight. Indeed, this size of group is conducive to a number of classic research moderation problems. A group of eight people (nine including the moderator) is not a natural social setting, whereas, a group of say five or six is more natural. Nine people cannot interact easily as a group with all nine being fully engaged and involved. This sets up a situation in which some respondents compete for time and attention whilst others withdraw, becoming the 'quiet ones'. Running research groups with slightly fewer than 'normal'

numbers of respondents allows all of those respondents to become more involved in and engaged with the research process. These slightly smaller groups also allow the moderator more time to understand more about where respondents are coming from and require less focus of effort in controlling the group and involving the 'excluded' respondents. Alternatively, many of the workshop approaches identified above have employed larger numbers of consumers participating (e.g. 12, 14, 16 and sometimes 20+) by using multiple moderators working as a team and conducting a variety of group workshop and syndicate sessions.

Again, the point here is that there is no ideal number for any form of market research group focused on brand evaluation and development. The key point is that the numbers must be constituted in such a way as to be manageable and to allow the moderators to provide effective guidance through the research process.

SAMPLING

Issues of sampling exist across the board in qualitative market research and are by no means specific to branding or brand development research. Sampling issues are dealt with in more detail elsewhere in this series (see Book 1). However, some brief review of the ways in which sampling issues can impact upon branding and brand development research is worthwhile.

The establishment of various demographic criteria by which qualitative research samples are structured is typically a standard part of any qualitative research design process. Here all manner of sample criteria may or may not be relevant; age, sex, socioeconomic grade, life stage, occupation, location and so on. In some respects these sample elements can be simply about practicalities – for example, where group discussions are used as a method it is important that the group can 'gel' and get along. This may mean that different age groups cannot be mixed; for example, mixing 18-year-olds with 30-year-olds is likely to create awkward dynamics on most subjects. Demographic differences may also be more or less significant depending upon the subject matter or market area under discussion. Most obviously here there can be significant gender differences in some markets, such as cars or beer.

In brand or brand development research it is also often crucial to construct an appropriate sample using brand or product usage criteria. Again there are no hard and fast rules, but there will always be value in asking what is best for the needs of the project and to structure the sample appropriately. Here there will be a need to consider recruitment on the basis of participation in the category. For example, developing branding for a range of new male fragrances do we need to focus upon regular and occasional users of existing products (probably we should), but do we also include those who are lapsed users and those who are non-users? Inclusion or exclusion of particular groups of people from the early stages of brand

development research can mean that potential market opportunities are never identified because the research never gave itself the chance to do so. Likewise there are issues in constructing samples which are to do with the patterns of brand/product usage; answering questions such as do we focus on those who appear habitually loyal to particular brands (and thus might in turn become 'loyal' to our brand if we could convert them)? Or should we focus more upon those who appear more promiscuous in their brand behaviour (who are likely to be easy to convert but hard to hold onto)? In researching established brands there are also clearly issues about whether recruitment focuses upon existing brand users: regular, occasional, lapsed, rejecters, or similar varieties of users of competing brands.

The various demographic and brand usage issues outlined above are primarily focused on ensuring that research samples recruit people with *appropriate* product or market experience that will be useful to the research results. Here we are not focused on creating a representative sample; this is not the qualitative enterprise. What we are concerned with, however, is ensuring that the main dimensions that might cause difference of perspective are at least represented within the overall sample. At this general level all of the above sampling issues are about getting the right representation within the sample.

Beyond this issue of representation, there is a further and fundamental sampling issue for branding and brand development research. This is about the utility or the *usefulness* of the consumers recruited to the particular task in hand. It is here that sampling begins to embrace a whole new set of criteria. Here the issues are about recruiting consumers who are more likely to be useful in helping the researcher to achieve the research objectives. Here the research might seek to select consumers on various attitudinal, motivational, behavioural or experiential criteria. For example, in developing a consumer electronics brand we might seek to recruit consumers on attitudinal dimensions establishing how far they were 'into technology'. In developing a new upmarket fashion range we might recruit consumers on a range of motivational statements reflecting how 'status driven' they were. In seeking to launch an entirely new brand and establish an initial 'toehold' for it in a marketplace we might look to recruit target consumers on a behavioural basis identifying them as 'early adopters'. In seeking to develop the imagery of a business airline we might seek to recruit on the basis of relative experience and expertise in long distance business travel (Phillips 2001).

INVOLVEMENT OR INTERFACE RESEARCH

The classic approach in qualitative consumer research keeps client and consumer apart, or at least separates them with a one-way mirror or a

video monitor. This separation is not necessary or inevitable. We have talked elsewhere of the benefits of changing the relationships within research (Chandler and Owen 1998). David Spenser has been one of a number of advocates of a style of work in which clients and consumers are brought closer together and has noted that this style is developing some momentum:

A range of different approaches, branded as 'brain banks', 'super groups', 'ideas workshops', 'sequential recycling', 'dialogue teams', 'breakthroughs', have already been developed by leading practitioners in this field. They have used different terminology and branding, but all these methods involve a shift from using research to find out about the consumer to using research as a means of managing clients and consumers working together in order to move forward together. (Spenser and Wells 2000: 248)

Over time a variety of these approaches has been used. The uniting principle of all of these has been the creation of a more *direct interface* between the consumer and client. This can involve changing the relationships between researcher, consumer and client as well as changing the timelines of research. This can mean, for example, building methodologies around reconvened groups so that one phase of a brand development project can roll into another, taking advantage of the heightened sensitivity that is built up in carefully selected consumers after a first phase.

There is a variety of different ways of organising these higher 'involvement' or 'interface' approaches. It remains an open question as to whether, for example, 'sequential recycling' or 'breakthrough' or 'dialogue teams' or any other variant is more or less appropriate to any particular problem. Perhaps more important than any of the individual variants within this style of approach is the range of problems and issues which they appear to be trying to address:

- In attempting to reduce the distance between the consumer and the brand owner research presents an opportunity to allow clients a greater involvement in the real world and real lives of consumers and what brands mean to them and the ways in which this meaning is conveyed, carried and interpreted.
- Conversely, some of these 'interface' approaches endeavour to more actively involve and engage consumers in marketing issues. On occasion this may involve nothing more than adopting a philosophical position of 'honesty' with consumers, informing them of the real character of marketing problems or issues and simply seeing whether this enables them to provide some additional insight. In other instances this can mean their fuller absorption in marketing issues over time, so that carefully selected respondents can actually become members or quasi members of the problem team.

Finally, more recent attempts to gain additional insights through breaking out of the time-honoured strait-jacket of 'standard groups and depths' have involved something of a return to the anthropological roots of research. Approaches that have been variously dubbed 'consumer ethnography' and 'observation research' do it differently by trying to get further inside and more fully inside the life world of the individual consumer (see Desai, Book 3).

RESEARCH INPUT AND OUTPUT

There is a variety of ways in which the skills and experience of qualitative researchers are used in developing brands that go beyond the confines of research itself. Here we enter into the territory of the researcher as consultant. Whilst it is not within the remit of this book to enter into the area of brand consultancy, there are nevertheless some aspects of consulting which can have a direct impact on brand research and where the researcher can play a crucial role. Specifically there are roles that the researcher can play in organising and developing research inputs and in aiding the progression of research outputs.

Designing qualitative brand research is not simply about determining how many groups or depths will happen with whom, it is also about helping in the development of appropriate stimulus materials. At various stages in the brand development research process it will be desirable and even necessary to feed specific inputs into the research. This is particularly so as research moves beyond more exploratory stages and into the development and evaluation of different brand/product offerings. Here stimulus materials might take a variety of different forms, for example, and most obviously:

- **Mood boards:** a collage of visuals which attempt to reflect a range of different emotional tones and themes which a brand might try to capture.
- **Concept boards:** written statements which try to project some sense of the underlying nature of the intended brand and some of its key elements or characteristics.

The performance of such materials in research – whether they 'win' and whether they are useful in creating responses that tell us something about where a brand could or should go – is influenced by three things:

- The virtue or value of the underlying 'idea' itself.
- The degree to which the stimulus manages to capture or reflect the underlying 'idea' without setting up dissonant resonances.
- How and how well the material is presented and managed in the research situation.

The last point is an issue of interviewing and moderation skills, a crucial and massive issue which is addressed elsewhere in this series (Chrzanowska, Book 2). The second point is an issue of research design.

Experienced researchers carry with them a stock of covert knowledge about how respondents tend to react to materials presented in research. This 'knowledge' has been built up out of the everyday experience of how consumers tend to respond to different types and styles of material in the research setting. For example, if consumers are presented with written concepts and/or propositions, which contain language and phrasing that is somehow reminiscent of advertising, they will tend to respond to it as if it were advertising. This may be fine if our interest is in identifying appropriate language for the sales situation, but it is a problem if our goal is the exploration of an underlying brand or product idea; in this instance language becomes the enemy of communication.

Here the key point is that researchers can and should have an active role in consulting upon the process of stimulus development. Whilst it is not necessarily the role of researchers to develop stimuli in terms of brand propositions, they can have a crucial role in advising on the optimum means of presenting these – their overall structure, make-up, use of language and so on. There is room here for the development of formal guidelines about concept presentation that brand researchers can provide to clients and their agencies.

At the early stages of brand development this assistance with input can be more than simply advising on structure, language and so on. The researcher's moderation skills can be used in 'brainstorming' sessions with client and agency personnel to aid in the initial generation and formulation of brand ideas. At the output end of research the same skills can be applied to help clients and their agencies formulate the new or revised brand. Most obviously this applies to the formulation of a brand model. Ideally the development of the brand model needs to be a collective process in which key representatives of interested parties are involved. If for no other reason, this is necessary to establish buy-in and commitment from all concerned. The central involvement of the researcher in this process is advisable because they, more than any other, can provide a direct reference to the world of the consumer.

Moreover, such is the nature of today's marketing environment that the researcher is often the person most consistently involved with a brand over a period of time. We touched on the potential limitations imposed upon brand managers in Chapter 3, and we should perhaps heed Udo Reuter's advice when he says

I recommend you to keep a 'history book' of your own brand and take good care of it, as it was common practice in former times. A tangible book that allows to follow all stages of brand development with figures, documentation of pack designs and advertising, and with stories of successful

and unsuccessful line extensions and other marketing measures ... This book should be compulsory for everyone taking care of the brand today and in the future. (Reuter 1993: 25)

KEY POINTS

The way in which qualitative research is structured can affect both the quality and depth of the information which it generates:

- A variety of different basic structures can be employed in qualitative research, e.g. groups versus depths. There is no perfect structural approach here. The virtues of different approaches need to be weighed against the needs of a project.
- Logistical or time issues in qualitative research are often not given adequate consideration. Often sessions are too short to achieve sufficient depth, often groups are too large to create the optimum working environment.
- Sampling for any project needs to be appropriate and will impact upon results.
- There is a growing role for more direct and on-going client involvement in the research process.
- Researchers could take a more active consultancy role in the development of stimulus material and in the use that is made of research results.



The Content of Brand Research

This chapter examines the role of what have traditionally been described as ‘projective’ and ‘enabling’ techniques. We explore the way in which the character of brands makes the application of such techniques valuable. A range and variety of different techniques are examined: techniques that can be generally applied; techniques more specific for needs research; brand language techniques and brand relationship techniques.

THE ROLE OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH TECHNIQUES

In the previous chapter we looked at how the design and structure of qualitative research can aid in brand and brand development research. In this chapter we shall explore the parallel issue of research technique. Other titles in this series are focused upon the business of running group discussions or conducting one-to-one interviews (see Book 2). It is not our intention here to duplicate this effort by developing a detailed theory or praxis for market research interviewing and moderation. Our goal here is not to create a blueprint for how to create a discussion guide or how to conduct a group discussion about brands. Our goal here is simply to examine the range of specific techniques that have been incorporated within qualitative research with the aim of evaluating and developing brands. We want to address, understand and organise how qualitative research techniques have been and can be employed to help *access and explore the world of brands*.

Few discussions about qualitative research methodology take place without making mention of ‘projective’ and ‘enabling’ techniques. Generally these labels are applied to a wide variety of different techniques that can be and have been employed in qualitative research. Wendy Gordon (1999) has stressed that brand evaluation and brand development research is *the territory* in which such techniques are of the most significant value. The major theme of this book has been the difficulty that consumers have accessing and articulating the meaning of brands. Qualitative research techniques are about providing a means of entry into this hidden or obscured world.

The terms ‘projective’ and ‘enabling’ techniques have their origins in psychology and psychotherapy. Classically, the idea of a *projective technique* relates to a device that allows the individual respondent to articulate

repressed or otherwise withheld feelings by projecting these onto another character. The idea of an *enabling technique* relates to a device which allows the individual respondent to find a means of expressing feelings, thoughts and so on which they find hard to articulate. In practice the 'projective' and 'enabling' labels have now come to be used as a blanket term for all kinds of research techniques that involve something more than simply talking to respondents in a 'question and answer' or 'discursive' fashion.

It has been argued that research techniques actually work by a variety of different, often 'intrusive', mechanisms (Chandler and Owen 1998). Some work because they provide consumers with ways of identifying 'implicit structures' e.g. the differences and relationships between brands in a marketplace – whether clothing, cars, or supermarkets. Some techniques work because they confront consumers with things that they must react to, so that the reality of a consumer's reaction forms the foundation for subsequent discussion. Some techniques work because they disrupt consumers' normal patterns of behaviour or the existing rules of the taken-for-granted world, e.g. by forcing them to experiment with new ways of behaving. Some techniques work by providing the consumer with ways of exploring new possibilities and moving beyond the world as it is now. Other techniques work by forcing consumers to make choices or attach weight to their feelings about different brands.

There may be some virtue in understanding the underlying mechanisms by which different techniques work; such insight can suggest new and additional possibilities. However, whether we label these 'projective and enabling' or 'creative' or 'exploratory' or anything else is to some degree academic. The meaning of different labels such as creative, projective, enabling has become so blurred over time that it is perhaps easier simply to talk of this whole set of techniques as being 'qualitative research techniques'. The particular tasks and exercises that are employed in qualitative research help respondents to move beyond the limits of what can readily be said.

Sometimes these techniques may involve nothing more complicated than a word association task, i.e. writing down or just speaking out the first things that come to mind when thinking about Diesel or The Gap or Next. In other instances, qualitative techniques can be more complex, such as playing a balloon game. Here teams of respondents might be asked to prepare a case for why Diesel should remain in a plummeting hot air balloon and why The Gap and Next should be thrown to their deaths so that Diesel might live. The key point in all of this is that research techniques help to generate additional layers of 'data'. Here we seek to generate types of data that are difficult and sometimes impossible to access through conventional, purely discursive, means. The application of qualitative techniques is about taking us further than conversation or discussion on its own can get us.

Here it is perhaps most useful to group these different techniques according to the areas in which they are of greatest utility. Thus we will

talk about a number of 'general techniques', some commonly used, others less so, which can be applied to a wide variety of different situations ranging from needs identification, brand identity, market structuring and so on. Other techniques have more specific areas of utility. We can identify a whole range of techniques that allow consumers to speak about brands precisely because they attempt to imitate 'brand language'. Other techniques have more obvious utility in exploring and identifying consumer needs in a marketplace. Yet more are specifically useful in illuminating consumers' relationships with brands, while others have specific value in identifying the potential 'meanings' that could be attached to a brand.

PRINCIPLES OF USING QUALITATIVE TECHNIQUES

Some of the criticism that is, on occasion, levelled at the whole area of qualitative research technique is that the 'data' it generates require careful handling and management. The client who is told that their restaurant brand is characterised by consumers as a 'BMW' is entitled to feel frustrated if they are not given any explanation of what this 'means' and its significance; does this imply a brand of excellent quality or a brand lacking in real style? Here Wendy Gordon stresses that projective and enabling techniques only have value insofar as they encourage consumers to talk in different ways (Gordon 1999). Thus, what consumers say about what they have done in completing a particular task or technique is of vital importance.

However, whilst these techniques are a crucial way of encouraging respondents to verbalise more, many also create data that has value in its own right. Collages (see below) created by consumers expressing their feelings about, say, the ideal holiday or washing up liquid can be analysed for the relative presence of different styles of visuals. The recurrent presence of words like 'traditional' or 'established' and the absence of words like 'innovative' or 'forward looking' when consumers are associating words with a particular car marque or bank, tells us something very concrete about how the brand is perceived regardless of how much satisfaction consumers subsequently express in their discussion of the brand.

The very nature of brands dictates the use of specific research techniques in branding and brand development research. The use of appropriately selected research techniques is vital because it can encourage and allow consumers to be more articulate than they otherwise could or would be. Qualitative techniques help consumers to discover and articulate feelings, impressions, associations and so on, which are not readily accessible to them. Beyond this, research techniques are also vital because they can provide the consumer with alternative languages in which they can be articulate. Thus, qualitative research techniques provide us with a 'way in' to the invisible layers of the mind, with a way of revealing culturally shared layers of taken-for-granted meaning and with an alternative

language for consumers to use that is more akin to the language of brands.

All this is not to say that all brand research should be technique-driven. Conducting good qualitative research is about achieving a successful balance between techniques and talking. We need to allow consumers to talk in an active, open and freewheeling way in order that they can identify what is relevant to them and what matters to them. At the same time we need to provide them with tools and stimuli which allow them to become more articulate and to discover what is hidden from their direct consciousness. Some basic principles for the conduct of interviews or groups employing qualitative research techniques are discussed later in the chapter.

GENERAL RESEARCH TECHNIQUES

A variety of techniques developed in qualitative research have potential applications across a range of different situations. These techniques are highly adaptable and versatile, and therefore have value in a number of different situations. Here, for example, simple techniques like *word association* or *associative chains* can be used as a means of exploring feelings about a marketplace, e.g. perfume or shampoo, about particular situations and experiences, e.g. wearing perfume or washing hair, or exploring associations with particular brands, e.g. Givenchy or Timotei. Whilst simple and easy to apply techniques such as these can have a wide range of applications, so too can some more complex and harder to apply techniques. Thus, *drawing* exercises can be used as a means of exploring experiences and feelings, e.g. about 'the newspapers' or 'reporters', and thus assisting in identifying consumer needs from newspapers. Just as easily drawing can be used as a means of examining feelings about and orientations towards different newspapers, e.g. *The Sun* vs. the *Daily Mirror* vs. the *Daily Mail*.

In the following few pages we list out a number of these techniques with a general and broad-ranging applicability. These are arranged from those that are perhaps easier to use/apply to those that can be more difficult.

Word Association

Word association is perhaps one of the simplest and most widely used of techniques in brand and brand development research. Here respondents are asked to think of the '*first things that come to mind*' in relation to a subject that might be either a situation, such as drinking coffee, or a brand – whether it be Maxwell House, Nescafé or Kenco. Often, in a group situation, it can be useful to ask respondents to write down their word associations, e.g. 'Write down the first 10 things that come to mind when you think about drinking coffee.' The benefit of these written responses is that they provide consumers with a base of reference from which to enter

the discussion and they provide the moderator with a point of reference from which to encourage shyer or more passive respondents to participate.

The virtues of this technique are that it is simple to use, relatively simple for consumers to do and that it often works well as a warm-up or initial exercise before moving onto more difficult or more unusual approaches. Using this technique in group situations, with each respondent writing down their own associations, provides the moderator with an indication of how widely or narrowly distributed particular associations with a brand are. Whilst word association does not necessarily probe particularly deeply into consumers' subterranean layers, its spontaneous character can encourage the identification of some of things that are most obvious to consumers and some elements that are a part of the culturally shared 'taken-for-granted' world.

Associative Chains

This technique is a variation on the principle of word association and can be particularly useful in fleshing out consumers' feelings and associations surrounding particular experiences, markets or even brands. Here the process of tracking down different associative chains begins by identifying a few core associations, for example, identifying three core associations linked to 'healthy eating'. These associations then become the focus for further exploration, identifying three further elements which consumers associate with these. Typically this approach demands more probing by the moderator/interviewer to identify subsequent links in a chain. This approach has the benefit of being relatively straightforward, can be used in both group and one-to-one situations, and is quite interactive in its character.

Laddering

This represents another variation on the word association principle. Here respondents are asked to provide examples or illustrate associations with a particular brand. Thus, if a respondent were to say that they associated the word 'strong' with Nescafé Gold Blend, the moderator might then ask 'In what way is it strong, can you give me an example?' The response to this probe can then be used to expand the realm of associations identified by introducing further probes, such as 'and what do you associate with that?'. This is a variation on the 'chunk-up, chunk-down' principle in Neuro-Linguistic Programming (see Book 3). As with the associative chains approach outlined above, this technique can be very valuable as a way of encouraging respondents to uncover some of the breadth of associations with any brand.

Bubble Pictures

Otherwise referred to as 'projective pictures' or 'cartoon completions', bubble pictures represent real or imagined situations in a newspaper or magazine 'cartoon' format. Typically these involve interactions between

two characters, sometimes more, with each character having both a speech bubble and a thought bubble. Respondents are invited to recreate the cartoon scene by filling in the speech and thought bubbles. This approach is highly adaptable, it can be used to recreate any scenario between two people interacting, it can be used to create imagined scenarios between a consumer and a brand, and it can be used to create fantasy scenarios between two brands. Thus, there is potential applicability in the identification of needs or in the exploration of brands. This long-established and frequently used technique is usually relatively straightforward for consumers to undertake since they understand the basic principle very well, and at the same time it can on occasion be quite revealing.

Historical Projection

This employs the 'past, present, future' scenario, where respondents are asked to construct a (usually written) portrait of a market or brand which is historical (e.g. say 5 years ago) versus now and identify key changes and developments between the past and the present. Then consumers are asked to project forward into the future, identifying key changes that they believe/anticipate will occur or that they want to occur. At this stage in more complex versions of this approach possible future events or scenarios can be introduced into this mix. This technique has the benefit of being readily intelligible to consumers and relatively easy to use. The approach is useful and interesting for the data that it generates, but also can be of particular value in subtly changing the mindset of respondents within a group. Here the act of looking back upon the past and comparing it with the present encourages consumers to recognise that things can and do change in real life, that change can be a normal part of the order of things. In brand development research, particularly where we are identifying needs or evaluating brand concepts, this can be of crucial importance in encouraging a more open mind towards new propositions.

Collage

This technique has been widely used and has a long heritage in qualitative market research. Here consumers, either working individually or as part of a pair or trio, are given scissors, glue and a large sheet of paper, and asked to cut and paste pictures (and perhaps words) from magazines to create a collage representing either a brand, their feelings about a particular situation or some other scenario. The key virtue of this approach is its visual focus. At this level it encourages non-rationalised responses and, from a brand evaluation point of view, 'speaks' in a language much more akin to that of brands themselves. This approach has a wide range of applications from establishing current brand identities, to exploring moods, feelings and desires in a marketplace, to exploring ideal brands or potential brands. Whilst consumers do require some encouragement and help in this process, they rarely experience it as fundamentally difficult. Some careful handling of consumers' explanation of and 'debriefing' of their collages is required as

consumers can on occasion be somewhat embarrassed about their creations. One key factor that can impact upon this technique is the character, quality and variety of the source materials, i.e. magazines that consumers are provided with to work from. Careful selection is required here to ensure a range of choice and that this range is appropriate.

Drawing

Respondents are given drawing paper and a set of coloured pencils or crayons and encouraged to express their feelings about particular situations or brands in a visual way. Where this approach works it can work well, not least because once consumers warm to the task they are at liberty to do whatever they want, unrestrained by the limitations imposed by pre-prepared stimuli. Here it is often useful to employ one or two 'warm-up' drawings (e.g. peace, anger, 'my car', 'my children', 'my boss', and so on). It can also be useful to encourage respondents to attach captions, catch phrases, or words of some sort to their pictures.

This is not an easy technique to execute, it requires setting up in such a way that respondents feel comfortable and at ease. It is important that respondents do not feel embarrassed or fear that they will be laughed at. Any nervousness on the part of the moderator in setting up such exercises can greatly contribute to their failure. In some instances such exercises can have a fairly hit and miss nature, not least because some people are far more visually orientated and expressive than others. However, in some instances this approach can be very evocative and can provide emotionally based visual evidence that can be quite powerful when communicating consumer feelings to clients.

Guided Fantasy

(See also 'Brand Rooms') In guided fantasy consumers are asked to close their eyes and take an imaginary journey that is led by the moderator. During the course of this journey they are asked to imagine various encounters and situations, to visualise these and imagine the events or outcomes. In many respects this type of approach is considerably easier than it sounds to those who have not used it. However, it does require a comfortable environment and a relationship of reasonable trust between the moderator and the group. This technique particularly requires careful use of tone of voice to persuade respondents to take the imaginary journey and to keep them feeling secure through this journey. This approach can be very useful in identifying consumers' feelings and associations surrounding particular experiences or product areas. Thus again it can have valuable uses in both identifying consumer needs (particularly at sub-conscious levels), and in providing inputs into possible brand identity development.

Role Play

In role play exercises consumers are asked to create dramatic scenarios which they are then asked to act out in order to portray some real or

imagined situation. Again this kind of approach can be applied across a wide variety of different situations. Scenarios might involve the interaction between a number of brands. Alternatively the scenario might involve recreating particular experiences, e.g. arriving at a hotel, consulting with a doctor, taking a train journey or going for a family day out. To be effective this kind of approach requires either more extrovert respondents or the establishment of an atmosphere of trust and a sense of energy and excitement in a group situation. Again one of the key virtues of this type of approach is its range of applications, from illuminating consumer needs to potentially identifying attitudes towards and relationships with brands.

TECHNIQUES FOR NEEDS RESEARCH

It is quite clear that some of the general techniques outlined above can have specific value in aiding the identification of existing and hidden or latent consumer needs. Beyond this more general collection of techniques, a number of research techniques offer a more specific contribution and have particular relevance to the *illumination and identification of needs*. Again there are no general rules regarding the operating mechanisms by which such techniques work. However, it is noteworthy that many of these techniques can help in identifying hidden or latent needs precisely because they approach problems at a tangent. These approaches are not so much bizarre as unusual; they encourage consumers to move well away from the world of everyday language and rationalisation, to approach things from significantly different directions. Gaming techniques encourage consumers to recapture some of the trivialities of everyday life which impact upon decision-making but are often 'edited out' of consumers' accounts as they reduce their behaviour to one or two key factors or motivations. Observation techniques provide a variety of ways of disciplining what consumers say with the reality of their everyday world rather than allowing them to fictionalise this in the process of an interview.

Brand Contract

This approach can be useful as a reasonably quick means of identifying some of the motivations and satisfactions involved in consumers' relationships with brands. Here consumers are asked to think about a brand and their use of it and to write a brief statement of the 'deal' or 'contract' that they feel they are entering into when they purchase or use a brand. Whilst this approach can be useful in brand identity exploration, it can also have considerable value as an additional input into market evaluation exercises and the identification of existing and latent consumer needs.

Statement Pools/Truth Games

Here consumers are presented with a range of attitudinal statements and told that these are designed to represent a variety of different attitudes

towards a marketplace or situation. Consumers are then asked to identify those with which they feel some sympathy or empathy. This can be done in a variety of ways which can be more or less mathematically precise. By carefully developing and selecting the research inputs this technique can be a valuable means of tying down key consumer motivations. As with some other techniques, this approach is very simple to use and relatively easy for consumers to undertake. The key requirement here is for careful development of stimulus. This approach can be particularly useful in needs research, but can also provide a direct input into the development of brand models or blueprints.

Diaries

This is one of a number of approaches which involves asking consumers to 'do something' before attending a research interview or group meeting. Essentially this method involves asking consumers to keep some record of their behaviour or a particular dimension of their behaviour for a period of time. For example, keeping a record of everything they have eaten over the course of a number of days, when they have eaten it, and so on. Alternatively they might be asked to keep a diary of every shopping experience they have had over a period of a week. This approach has the major benefit of providing a concrete account of behaviour which can be interrogated; it focuses upon the real world rather than some imagined or edited version of it. In situations where the object of the exercise is to interrogate behaviour in some detail, this approach can be best undertaken through one-to-one interviews. Where the object of the exercise is to encourage consumers to be more in tune with their own real behaviour, this can work equally well in a group setting.

Behavioural Modification

In some circumstances it can be useful to encourage consumers to modify their behaviour in some way and then simply to explore what improvisations or changes are made. This is an exercise that can be undertaken either 'for real' or conceptually. Consumers might, for example, be asked to abandon their normal mode of transport to work, or be asked not to use butter for two weeks. What is important here is that forcing modifications of behaviour can encourage consumers to improvise and thus gain more insight into their own behaviour and experiences. Such approaches can be most useful when attempting to explore consumer needs.

Brand Graffiti

Here consumers are given some visual representation of a brand, for example, an A4 sheet of paper with the brand logo and some pictures of product on it. Consumers are then asked to deface these by scribbling graffiti across them. This approach can provide some useful insights into consumers' relationships with different brands in a marketplace and the

paraphernalia associated with them. Whilst this technique has some value in exploring brand identity, it can be more useful in identifying some of the underlying passions within consumer culture and thus can make a contribution to needs identification.

Observation Techniques

A variety of different approaches incorporates some element of observation. The use of observational research, particularly in its ethnographic sense, is the core subject matter of Book 3 in this series. No such depth of cover can be given to these approaches here, however it is important to stress that a number of variations on the 'observation research' principle can be of considerable utility in the brand development process. The usefulness of observation techniques here tends to be more in the territory of identifying consumer needs than in, for example, exploring brand identity. Observation does not have to be only about recording and modelling consumer behaviour. 'Observation techniques' can also involve asking consumers to monitor their own behaviour, such as photographing stages in the conduct of particular activities, or it may be about asking consumers to watch and explain films of behaviour of other consumers (see Chandler 2000). It may involve researchers observing consumer behaviour in some public situation and then intercepting consumers *in situ* and talking about their behaviour with them.

Storyboarding

As a creative qualitative research approach, 'storyboarding' needs to be clearly distinguished from the use of advertising story boards in advertising development/evaluation research. Here, the 'storyboarding' technique is a highly creative one in which consumers are asked to create a storyboard for a short film about a particular subject matter, e.g. flying, driving, a train journey, my ideal holiday, and so on. This approach can be particularly useful in needs identification research because the creative licence which it allows consumers can throw up previously unconsidered dimensions of consumer motivation and feeling. The key difficulty with this approach is that it does require some confidence on the part of consumers and an environment of trust. Typically this kind of approach would be reserved for use at the creative peak of extended groups or workshop sessions.

Gaming Techniques

A variety of different approaches has been developed around the basic principle of asking consumers to re-create real world situations or decision processes as if these were board games (see Chandler and Owen 1986). Consumers might, for example, be asked to create a game of 'snakes and ladders' out of the various events that occur in the course of deciding to purchase a car, re-creating little vignettes which take the process forward or move it back. This type of approach can be beneficial in the way that it encourages consumers to focus less upon the obvious and significant factors

that influence 'decision processes'. The 'game-like' nature of this approach also encourages the identification of many less obvious and trivial influences. It is important here to design a game scenario that has some sympathy with the marketplace in question and instructions to respondents need to be clear. However, this approach can be very valuable in opening up a rich portrait of the influences upon consumer behaviour. As such the real value of this approach can be its contribution to the need evaluation stage of brand development research.

BRAND LANGUAGE TECHNIQUES

A variety of qualitative research techniques is available which have specific utility and value when attempting to identify and explore brand identities. Many of these techniques 'work' because they are in some way closer to the 'language' of brands. These brand language techniques work because, for example, *picture sorts* operate at a visual level, when visuals are often both the vehicle through which brands communicate and the form in which much brand information is consciously or unconsciously stored. *Adjective lists*, although verbal in nature, work because they provide single, disordered, words for the consumer to latch onto (or not) as somehow reflecting the character of a brand. '*Catch phrasing*' works precisely because it seeks to identify phrases relating to a brand that have somehow managed to lodge in the consumer's mind. '*Brand rooms*' or the '*front page*' exercise work through a kind of brand language insofar as they deal in stories and narratives in which mood and tonality are as important as the furniture or paraphernalia inhabiting a particular scene.

Adjective/Word Lists

Again as an element employed on its own, in isolation from others, this is of potentially limited value in getting to the real heart of brands, particularly in areas that are less thought about and thought through. However, as a part of a larger 'brand language' exploration exercise this approach can be very useful. Here respondents are provided with lists of adjectives or words covering a whole range of possibilities for describing a brand. Respondents are then asked simply to identify some, perhaps six to a dozen, which in some way reflect how they think or feel about a particular brand. In contrast to word association this does 'lead' the respondent by providing a number of options (say 50–100 words). Whilst in some ways 'leading', this approach has two particular benefits. First, it can trigger real associations which might not spontaneously emerge, and secondly, the stimulus that can provide this trigger is controlled. Thus, in developing a range of words for a particular project, these can be tailored to the needs of the particular marketplace (although we do need to be careful not to introduce bias here).

Brand Personification

Here consumers are asked to imagine a brand coming to life as a particular character. This can be a more or less complex process. At its simplest level, consumers can simply be asked to suggest who a brand would be if it were a public personality and subsequently to explain their choices. At a more complex level this can involve the development of a more detailed portrait, including the brand's lifestyle, its relationships, how it deals with other people, its occupation and so on. The important aspects of all of this are the reasons that consumers provide for their choices. Again, this technique has a particular role as one possible part of a brand language exploration of brand identity.

User Personification

Here consumers are asked to create portraits, not of the brand, but of users of the brand. This simple technique can, on occasion, be very valuable in identifying and illuminating some of the prejudices and preconceptions that can exist when consumers survey the world of brands. Again, this approach can be most valuable as one element within some larger brand language evaluation process.

Metaphor/Analogy

Here a further variation of the brand personification theme is asking respondents to imagine a brand not as a person but as something else, whether it be animal, vegetable or mineral. Here consumers might be asked to imagine that a brand was an animal, a flower, a restaurant, and so on. Whilst knowing that Brand X is seen as a tiger rather than an elephant or a deer can be revealing in itself, metaphors and analogies are often useful because they prompt consumers to explore what they feel is 'tiger-like' about Brand X. Again, one of the key virtues of this approach is its simplicity.

Mapping Exercises

Here consumers are asked to create some form of physical 'map' or representation of a particular marketplace. Consumers might be given a dozen or so different brands and asked to group these in relation to one another, identifying key similarities and differences. This approach gives consumers a 'spatial language' in which to capture or express some of the implicitly spatial relationships that do exist between brands. These exercises are best undertaken using the products themselves, for example, a dozen tubes of toothpaste, or alternatively the corporate logos of, say, a dozen financial organisations. In some instances this approach can be undertaken by giving consumers specific indications of the appropriate criteria. Often it is interesting and important to allow consumers to identify their own dimensions to use in mapping products. This approach can be useful at various stages in the brand development process. It is included here because of its particular value in identifying core similarities and differences between brands.

Brand Rooms

The brand room technique is a specific variation on guided fantasy (discussed above). Consumers are asked to imagine themselves entering a room which is the embodiment of a particular brand. Other variations on this approach can be the **brand hotel** or the **brand office**. Here consumers are asked to conjure up, visualise and experience different aspects of the brand room – its furniture, its atmosphere, its décor, the sounds from inside and outside of the room, the pictures on the walls, the type of room and so on. Again this can be a powerful mechanism for identifying a broader range and variety of associations with a particular brand or different brands.

Alexander Biel (1997) cites Olsen and Allen as introducing an interesting variation of this theme of brand stories or guided fantasies. Here respondents are asked to imagine the brand as a person, and respondents are then asked to play the role of a private investigator who follows the brand around for a day.

Picture Sorts

This technique involves the creation of a pre-selected set of visual images, anything from 50 to 150, and the use of these by consumers to identify what they associate with or how they feel about particular brands, situations and so on. The range of applications of this approach is very similar to that of collage, i.e. it is broad and varied. The key difference lies in the fact that the range of choice which consumers are given has been pre-determined. It is worth noting here that consumers often feel far less embarrassed or inhibited in talking about their selections from such pre-determined sets. In situations where it is possible to reasonably pre-select the range of images that will be of value, this approach can be particularly useful. This technique has, for instance, been widely used in exploring the meaning of different national identities and how these influence expectations from different brands in different marketplaces, e.g. banks, beer, cars, clothing.

Brand Twinning

This technique involves providing respondents with a pre-prepared list of brands containing between 50 and 100 brands drawn from a variety of different product areas. Consumers are then asked to identify those which are similar in some way to the brand under discussion (say three or four). Again, this is an approach which on its own provides only limited and possibly misleading indications. However, as a part of a broader set of 'brand language' techniques it can be highly illuminating. This technique is particularly useful in exploring brand identity for existing and potential brands and often allows the identification of multiple dimensions of a brand's character. Here the benefit of brand twinning, in contrast with other personification exercises, is that comparisons or parallels often have a more natural character. For consumers there can be more obvious and

natural parallels between one brand and another, than between a brand and, say, an animal.

Mission Statements

Here consumers are given an explanation or reminder of what a brand or corporate mission statement is and provided with a few illustrations of these. Consumers are then invited to construct their own mission statements for some of the key players in a particular market, ideally three. Consumers are asked to create their mission statements on the basis of what they know of or feel about a particular brand. This approach can be useful as a part of the business of exploring and identifying brand identity. This has the benefit of reducing focus onto some of the core essentials of what a brand is actually felt to deliver. This kind of approach is relatively straightforward to set up and for consumers to undertake. This approach has the additional benefit of providing a direct point of contrast between a brand owner's 'vision' of their brand and the consumer's.

Catchphrases

Here consumers are asked to write down three things which they have heard said (or feel that they have heard said) about a brand. In conducting this catch phrase exercise it is often useful to suggest to consumers that this might be things that other people have said about a brand or things they have heard or seen in the media. This approach can be quite useful in capturing, on the one hand, some of the 'hearsay' which surrounds a brand and, on the other hand, in identifying any words or phrases from marketing effort which appear to have lodged in the consumer's mind. Again this technique can be useful as a part of a wider 'brand language' package aimed at brand identity evaluation.

Colour Swatches

In isolation this technique is of little value and is potentially highly misleading. However, as a part of an integrated brand language-based section of a group or interview it can be highly illuminating. Here respondents, either individually or in teams, are given a set of colour swatches literally covering a whole spectrum of possibilities (fewer than 20 can provide too few options, more than 40 can be overkill). Consumers are then asked to select the colour or colours which are most appropriate to a given situation or brand. This technique has a number of virtues; it is quick, simple and easy to set up, and it is simple and easy for consumers to undertake. It has a wide range of potential applications; it can be used to explore situations, feelings and experiences, brand identities and ideal or potential brand identities. It also has the virtue of on the one hand allowing consumers to talk about how they feel in a very different kind of way, thus potentially triggering new or additional insights; equally, it can provide very useful 'tonal' information about brand identity and potential brand identity, e.g. it would be extremely telling to know that a

particular brand of, say, pain killer was only ever associated with pastel shades of colour.

Brand Geometry

This technique involves presenting consumers with a whole range of different shapes, say 30 or so on an A3 sheet. Here respondents are invited to identify those that in some way or other have some link or association with the brand. Although its applicability can be highly variable between different market areas, on occasion this approach can be effective at identifying both concrete physical associations with a brand, such as physical impressions of the nature of the product, or can assist in the identification of more abstract characteristics. Again the primary value of such an approach is in the exploration of brand identity, as one component in a wider brand language exploration. As with some other brand language techniques, e.g. colour swatches, this approach does have the benefit of being simple to use and quick to undertake. It either works or it doesn't.

BRAND RELATIONSHIP TECHNIQUES

Not all of the techniques enumerated here work through the brand language mechanism. Some assist in the exploration of brand meaning and identity through the way in which they help to identify the nature and character of consumer relationships with the brand. Thus, the *shopping basket* and *balloon games* techniques described below both encourage consumers to respond to a brand and then, in very different ways, explain or explore the nature of their response.

Balloon Games

This approach can provide a good finale to a brand identity evaluation group. The group is presented with a hypothetical scenario of three brands as passengers in a hot air balloon which is leaking and rapidly plummeting to earth. The balloon can only be saved if two brands are thrown out. The group is divided into three teams, each team is allocated a brand and asked to create an argument as to why their brand should stay in the balloon and the others should be thrown out. After a few minutes' preparation, each team presents its case. Apart from its entertainment value in rounding off a group, this approach has two key positive values: it tends to identify the real weak spots in brands – in attacking competitive brands consumers 'go for the jugular' – conversely, it can help identify the core strengths of a brand since these are the platforms from which consumers will typically defend 'their brand'.

Party Scenarios

Here consumers are presented with the imaginary situation of a party to which a variety of different brands have come. They are asked to create an

account of the party: how do the brands appear, what do they do at the party, who do they interact with, how do they interact with one another, and so on. These scenarios can be created by individual respondents working on their own or working as part of a pair or team. Sometimes there can be value in getting consumers to act out their party vignettes. The benefit of this approach is that it can encourage consumers to explore some of the implicit relationships between brands in a marketplace and it can reveal something of consumers' orientations towards and relationships with different brands. Although by no means simple and requiring some element of trust and confidence to be established, this technique is relatively straightforward for consumers to undertake.

The Reporter

Also known as the *front page* scenario, this is where consumers are asked to imagine that they are a reporter who has been given the task of writing a story or feature about a brand. Here consumers might be encouraged to focus upon the activities of the brand or conduct an interview with it or report on a visit to its offices, and so on. Again, this type of approach can be valuable in revealing some of the implicit relationships between consumers and brands. Typically this would be undertaken by respondents working individually but within a group context. Within group situations some variation might be introduced by asking half of the group to write stories about one brand whilst the other half of the group write stories about another.

Shopping Baskets

In this situation consumers are presented with a wide array of different brands within a marketplace, e.g. an entire chiller cabinet might in effect be reproduced within a research room. Consumers would then be given shopping baskets and asked to select an item or a number of items. Here a variety of different instructions or guidance could be given depending upon need – for example, they might be asked to select the most desirable item, the most interesting, or the most acceptable. The underlying principle here is that of encouraging consumers to make snap decisions and selections. These choices are then used by the moderator as a point from which to explore or interrogate the selections that have been made. Clearly it is possible to recreate these scenarios in a very literal way for FMCG (fast moving consumer goods) products. However, this kind of exercise can be repeated at a conceptual level for virtually any product or service area, e.g. airlines, telecoms, retailers.

Obituaries

In the obituary technique respondents are asked to imagine that a particular brand has died and to write an obituary for it. Here respondents can be encouraged to imitate the nature of obituaries, reviewing the overall life, identifying key events and key contributions, but also identifying the

manner and nature of death. This technique is often interesting because it encourages consumers to focus upon a few core elements of brand identity, to make judgements about the actual contribution of a brand to a market and to speculate about causes for any potential demise of the brand.

Job References

This approach is similar in some respects to the obituary or reporter scenario, but approaches it from a somewhat different angle. Here consumers are asked to imagine that they are the one-time employer of a particular brand and that they have been approached by someone else to give that brand a job reference. Consumers are asked to write a paragraph or two about the brand in the style of a job reference – its characteristics and virtues as an employee, relationships with fellow workers, and so on. Like other similar techniques, this approach encourages consumers to identify the key facets and values of a brand as well as suggesting some underlying feelings about it.

TECHNIQUES TO IDENTIFY MEANING SETS

A key requirement of the brand development process is the identification of the potential meaning set from which brands could select to build or build upon their identities. Here it is useful to remind ourselves that this meaning set is potentially enormous and potentially made up of a whole gamut of feelings, emotional orientations, values, ideas, associations, images, and so on. By definition many of the research techniques already outlined (particularly some general and brand language techniques) can provide input into this particular process. However, a small number of techniques can have particular pertinence here. Perhaps most notable amongst those already outlined are *guided fantasy*, *collage*, *storyboarding*, *picture sorts*, *word association*, *associative chains*, and *colour swatches*. The following techniques are of more specific value.

Mood Boards

This technique represents a third variation on the visual brand language principle, also seen with collage and picture sorts. Here a set of boards displaying a range and variety of visual images (and sometimes also words) is created, with each board attempting to capture a particular theme or mood – for example, luxury, simplicity, indulgence etc. The themes of the various boards employed are pre-determined according to those which are seen as potentially fitting. These boards can be used in a variety of different ways to explore consumers' feelings about a particular marketplace, to identify how they think or feel about different brands, and particularly to explore the realm of potential imagery which could be attached to some future brand. Like collage and picture sorts, this

approach has a wide range of applications and the core benefit of being a real 'brand language' style of approach.

Cocktail Games or Identikit

This approach can be employed in various ways, but it essentially involves inviting consumers to take different aspects of existing brands in a marketplace (or other marketplaces) and to create a composite 'ideal brand' out of these. This task can be done either in a very simple way, with no stimulus other than five or six brand names, or can be more involved through providing the consumer with various pieces of brand paraphernalia to work with (e.g. advertising, packaging, brochures). The most obvious role of this approach is as a stepping-stone in the development of future brand identity. However, this approach can also be highly productive in identifying existing and potential consumer needs.

QUALITATIVE TECHNIQUES WITHIN BRAND RESEARCH

There is nothing magical, radical or extreme about any of the techniques outlined above. Many of them will be familiar to many qualitative researchers in commercial market research, particularly those who have spent much of their time trying to tease out what this or that brand means, or identify latent needs in an apparently satisfied market. The fact that all of these techniques have been used productively on different occasions suggests that they can work to uncover hidden thoughts and feelings. More significantly, it suggests that they can provide a window into a world that has never really been 'thought' in linguistic terms. What is outlined above is simply a range of devices, a range of tasks which consumers can be asked to undertake and which can be useful in providing some greater access into the world of brands and the issues of need, motivation, impulse and so on, that surround it.

These tasks are a crucially important adjunct to the business of interviewing or moderating, not an alternative to it. These tasks – qualitative research techniques, as we have chosen to call them – are not a substitute for interviewing skills, sensitivity or pursuit of insights. Successful brand research is dependent on interviewing skills just as much as it is dependent upon the use of appropriate qualitative techniques. The point here is not to see these as two opposing approaches to interviewing or discussion – the 'technique-driven' versus the discursive or 'talk-driven' approach – the point is to see these as two dimensions of the same thing. They should be blended seamlessly together in a way that both moderators and respondents can take in their stride. In managing this there are some key issues relating to the selection and use of qualitative techniques: that these require an adequate time frame, that a range of complementary techniques is desirable, that these require skilled application and balancing with discussion.

Time Frame

As has been observed in Chapter 6, the use of qualitative techniques requires time. Consumers need to be given time to work their way through appropriate tasks in a way that does not feel rushed. Likewise it is important to allow time for respondents to talk about what they have done and for the moderator to probe this.

Range of Techniques

In any instance, research is likely to benefit from the use of multiple techniques rather than a single technique. Here multiple techniques are likely to 'shine different lights' on the problem, be more likely to open up new issues, and can serve as a mechanism that checks and qualifies the results arising out of other specific qualitative techniques – the basic hermeneutic principle. Whilst multiple qualitative techniques are usually the optimal approach, it has to be recognised that too few or too many techniques can create problems. Too few can create an insufficient and unbalanced picture, whilst too many can become unwieldy and risk the danger of losing focus.

Complementary Techniques

In selecting techniques, it is important that these complement one another and can be interlinked in such a way that moderators can probe, cross-reference and create links between what is said in response to different tasks. This linking and cross-referencing is fundamental. It is the hermeneutic check. Thus, for example, the meanings and implications suggested in drawing can give weight and focus to elements within the complex of brand associations illuminated through word association and mood boards, whilst an obituary or job reference provides some indication of how a consumer relates to these, and the relative strength of these bonds is tested in something like a balloon game.

Balanced with Discussion

Qualitative research techniques need to be brought together in the right balance of discussion, exploration and focus upon tasks. This means that in creating discussion guides researchers need to understand the relative simplicity or complexity of the tasks they are proposing to employ. Thus more complex tasks need to be used more judiciously – say one, two, or at a maximum three per group depending upon the group length – primarily because of the time these take. Conversely, where simpler (and quicker) qualitative techniques are employed a number of these can be used in any group situation.

Skilled Application

The application of qualitative research techniques requires experience and skill on the part of the moderator. This is required both to ensure that consumers understand what they have to do and feel comfortable about

it, and also to ensure that problems arising are managed easily, ensuring that results are explored appropriately and are analysed intelligently and beneficially.

Balancing the use of techniques within the framework of group sessions or other interviews is a sensitive issue. It is partly about moderator/interviewer sensitivity and it is partly about design of discussion or interview guides. These issues are dealt with at length elsewhere (see Book 2). However, a few specific points should be made about the design of brand discussions/interviews employing qualitative techniques:

- **General to specific:** As a general principle it is usually best if discussions move from more general to more specific issues. The application of techniques should likewise generally follow this principle.
- **Straightforward first:** There are differences between techniques in their degree of difficulty or complexity. It is usually better to begin with something relatively straightforward.
- **Explain what you're doing:** Techniques are best presented with a relaxed and simple explanation of the technique and why it is being used. Respondents need to be given clear instructions, in a confident and straightforward manner, as to what they are supposed to do. This does not need to be complex or involved, but does need to make respondents feel at ease and positive. Respondents need to feel that what they are being asked to do is reasonable, makes sense and could be interesting or fun.
- **Clear rules:** Respondents need to be given clear instructions, in a confident and straightforward manner, as to what they are supposed to do.
- **Explore significance:** Discussion, whether group- or interview-based, needs to move freely from discussion of what was done in a task, to what this means, to what happens in 'real life'.

KEY POINTS

What is actually done within qualitative research has a crucial influence on its ability to enter into and portray the world of brands:

- The character of brands as collections of 'bits' of memory organised by 'schemata' in the human mind means that 'question and answer' approaches to uncovering and exploring brands have limitations.
- Various qualitative techniques, traditionally described as 'projective' and 'enabling', have been developed to assist in researching brands and brand development.
- In practice, such techniques work by a variety of different operating principles and are useful for different purposes.

- A number of key issues or considerations apply to the use of such techniques, including time frame, range of techniques, balance with discussion and skill in application.
- A number of basic principles need to be recognised in the application of qualitative techniques.



Developing Brands through Qualitative Research

This final chapter attempts to draw together some of the themes developed throughout this book and reflects upon a number of key issues that these throw up. Here we discuss how the nature and character of brands need to be understood and integrated into the way that research is designed and analysed. We explore the way in which the increasing focus on the international setting for qualitative brand research magnifies some of the traditional issues in qualitative research. Finally, we offer some speculation about the future.

BRANDS AND QUALITATIVE MARKET RESEARCH

The objective of this series of books is not to provide a set of 'how to do it' guides for the practice of qualitative market research. Rather, the aim of this series has been to identify the *issues at work* in qualitative market research. We have tried to make visible and explicit some of the 'oral tradition' of knowledge that underpins everyday qualitative market research practice. In working here on a title focused upon brands and brand development, we have attempted to follow this same broad course.

What we have discussed owes much to the published work of a vast array of research practitioners and others involved in the brand and marketing industry. It also owes much to the wider market research community, who through their development of everyday market research practice have contributed to a collective, although often assumed or taken-for-granted, stock of brand and branding research knowledge. Insofar as we have contributed to the debate and discussion of brand research it has been through attempting to organise some of the issues, addressing some relatively neglected areas, and cherry-picking the best of what others before us have said or concluded.

Rather than attempt to provide a 'how to do it' manual for brand development through qualitative research we have tried to add to and advance the debate about what brands are. We have explored the nature of their existence and how they change, and the analytic and intellectual processes

which underlie marketing efforts to create and develop brands. Beyond this we have attempted to explain why qualitative research is uniquely positioned to aid in both the identification of what brands are and how and where they can be developed. We have further examined some of the key analytic and information needs underlying the brand development process and explored how both the way in which qualitative research is structured and the specific techniques and practices which it employs can aid in this information-gathering and analytic process.

This book began by attempting to tie down the 'what are brands' question by exploring the views of a range of commentators. Alongside this we attempted to articulate some of the underlying assumptions about brands which are built into qualitative research practice. In essence, this collective 'industry view' of brands has a number of dimensions. Brands are seen as significant or relevant because they are seen to influence consumer behaviour.

At the most obvious levels, brands serve as a way of identifying and authenticating products and as a means of differentiation, giving the consumer a means of 'selecting' between a potentially vast array of choices. At their heart brands are universally seen as representing some kind of meaning system or meaning complex. Any brand brings with it sets of associations, values, feelings, emotions and so on. These exist at a variety of different levels, some of which may be readily identifiable and observable, others of which may be less conscious and less visible. The 'character' of these individual brand meaning systems is ultimately unique in make-up. Whilst any individual consumer may have their own idiosyncratic impression or vision of a brand, substantial elements of this are also culturally shared by groups and sub-groups of consumers. The meaning system or meaning complex that is a brand is typically seen as fulfilling functions – addressing individual and collective psychological and emotional needs for consumers. Simultaneously, brands are involved in identity processes, being bound up in processes through which consumers identify and express who they are and/or identify and navigate the nature of the world around them. Finally, there are some key themes which are more to do with the relationship between the brands and consumers; implicit in this is the idea that the brand can represent a kind of contractual arrangement with the consumer and that this is more an article of faith or charisma than it is a feature of functional performance.

Brands have been portrayed here as existing as much in the world of the consumer as in the world of the marketer. The brand can only be understood as the product of a negotiation between consumers themselves and what emanates from brands. In exploring this negotiation process, we have seen how this is rarely fully conscious. It involves consumers interacting with brands and brand communications in ways that are largely passive and invisible, semi-conscious and unconscious. This negotiation is also a collective and cultural process; through everyday interaction and behaviour with other consumers people develop a shared,

taken-for-granted sense of what brands mean, their place in the order of things, and so on.

The fact that brands are a negotiated reality has clear consequences for the marketer. It means that attempts to influence consumers' perceptions must begin from an understanding of their world, their needs, and so on. Over time, various brand modelling processes have evolved and developed as a foundation for brand development. Where such models do not exist or are not used in a formal way, some of the processes they entail are usually present nevertheless. Whilst there is no ultimate brand model suited to all needs and pertinent to all situations, a number of core elements recur in many brand models. Here there is a vital distinction between what we might call a 'brand portrait' (a current picture of the brand) and a 'brand model'. The key goal of the brand model is not to define a brand in the here and now but to serve as a blueprint for *what the brand endeavours to be*. In principle, the role of the brand model is to serve as a guiding reference point for everything that markets do.

Our argument has been that the psychological and cultural nature of brands, their existence at levels of individual and shared consciousness that are passive, invisible, taken-for-granted and sub-conscious, requires an overall approach to research which is capable of accessing these less overt areas to some degree. Here we have attempted to articulate an epistemological basis for qualitative research that is peculiarly relevant to the world of brands. The nature of qualitative interviewing as a fluid discourse means that it can be a fundamentally hermeneutic method, a method that constantly checks the meaning of every utterance or statement by cross-referencing it with others and by probing as a further check. On top of this, qualitative research has evolved a wide variety of different 'structural' approaches which in different situations can further aid in the utility of results to the brand development process. Likewise, qualitative research techniques, traditionally labelled as 'projective' and 'enabling' techniques, have developed and expanded over the years to enhance the researcher's ability to access the psychological and cultural dimensions of brands which exist 'below' surface layers. Because most of what a brand is does not exist at a conscious or primarily linguistic level for any consumer, techniques are required that go beyond simple discussion or 'question and answer'. We must provide consumers with ways of bringing the submerged to the surface and expressing this in some way. Likewise, qualitative research techniques are also vital as a means of exploring implicit attitudes and assumptions about marketplaces, of identifying hidden contradictions and market dynamics, of exploring possible future scenarios.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH DESIGN

Again and again we have encountered the proposition that in qualitative research there can be no blanket solutions to a particular type of research

problem. There is no such thing as the correct approach; there are *options* of style, structure and technique. In designing research approaches for brand and brand development projects the key need is for overall approaches that are brand-sensitive. This means that research approaches need to recognise what brands are, most obviously recognising their non-verbal and non-rational character.

All of this means that the methodological problems confronting any brand project will have their own unique aspects. The options in terms of process, structure and technique that have been outlined in this volume exist as an array of possibilities that can be called upon when designing qualitative research to evaluate brands and assist in brand development. The start point for such design processes is necessarily the set of objectives that can be defined for a project.

Good qualitative research design begins in the interaction between the researcher and the client or brand owner. The goal here is not necessarily a close relationship between researcher and client, although this can help. The goal is that stated objectives are tested and scrutinised in some way. Here it is vital that stated objectives are not taken at face value, as either the real objectives or the necessary objectives. Whoever constructed the project objectives in the first place may not have been fully focused on the problem, may not have known or been able to articulate what was really required, may have been constrained by the limitations of their own experience, and so on. Good qualitative research design begins with an interrogation of research objectives. In part this interrogation means posing questions like 'Do these objectives make sense given past work and what is currently known about a brand or a market-place?' Interrogation also means posing the question 'What are the desired outputs of the research?' and 'What are the desired actions that will be taken?'

From this interrogation of established objectives and desired outputs, and any re-definition or reframing of these, the researcher then needs to create an overall research structure which has the best chance to meet these needs. Here such structural issues as groups vs. depths, duration, client involvement, feedback loops and mechanisms all need to be considered (Chapter 6).

Designing effective research also means that within the overall framework or structure created, discussion guides or research approaches need to be created which do recognise a number of overall rules. Here the flow of discussion or the interview approach needs to be manageable, needs to be one that will naturally ease respondents into the research process, it needs to employ a range of techniques that will provide additional access beyond that afforded by simple 'question and answer' style discussion. Most significantly, such discussion guides need to employ overall and specific approaches that will allow the interesting and the challenging to emerge rather than just the expected or the average (see Chapter 7).

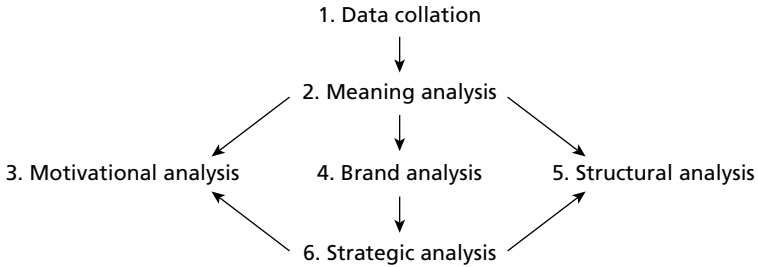


FIGURE 8.1 *Key stages in brand development analysis*

BRAND-SENSITIVE ANALYSIS

The process of conducting qualitative research, regardless of how well designed this may be, rarely provides all the answers on a plate. The methods, structures and techniques of qualitative research are about generating data which can help us move towards the answers to questions; the data itself rarely provides the answer. The creation of qualitative research data, in whatever form this is, is not an end in itself but is the start point for an equally important process of analysis.

The various brand portraits and brand models described in this book are designed to help analysis in brand evaluation and development by providing some formal analytic models and procedures. Likewise, the portrayal of brand development as a process (see Chapter 5) is an attempt to formalise different conceptual stages in brand development research.

In any brand evaluation or brand development project it is vital to understand the interplay of a brand with the rest of the market and with consumer and market needs. Such an understanding needs to appreciate current and future situations. Analysis is as much about projecting future possibilities and potential scenarios as it is about simply portraying the present.

The central remit of this volume is not with the detailed process of analysis (for which see Book 4). However, it needs to be emphasised here that analysis is neither a single stage nor a simple process. Effective analysis of research results in brand development research can be seen as needing potentially to incorporate six different dimensions, not all of which will apply in any individual instance (Figure 8.1).

To some degree the set of key analytic functions or stages shown in Figure 8.1 does involve working data through a sequence which begins with 'raw data' that first needs to be grouped, ordered and organised in some way (1 Data collation). Beyond simple collation of data there is always a further analytic requirement to identify what this 'means' to consumers in their everyday lives (2 Meaning analysis). Here the role of analysis is to move beyond raw data that says this brand is characterised

as 'a pizza' or 'Richard Branson', or that when visually depicting the brand in some way pastel shades or sharp angles appear quite prominently. Here there is a need to provide some explanation of why such characterisations are made and what this appears to mean in terms of consumers' underlying perceptions and feelings about a brand.

These first two analytic steps are *de rigueur* in practically any analytic process in brand evaluation and brand development research. These first two steps are the analytic start point rather than the analytic end point. Beyond these start points the analytic path will depend upon research objectives, but could include any combination of motivational analysis, brand analysis, structural analysis or strategic analysis.

Motivational analysis essentially means posing the question 'What does the research data and its meaning tell us about consumer psychology, consumer culture and consumer motivation?' Alongside this we might often expect to be conducting a parallel brand analysis, in which we pose the questions 'What practical, psychological, emotional, cultural or sociological needs do existing brands meet?' and 'What sets of needs could potential brands in the marketplace meet?' Unless we can answer these questions at this level about, for example L'Oreal or Adidas, we have no platform for brand development to build upon. Structural analysis means asking questions about what raw data and its meaning tells us about the current market structure, current and future dynamics, tensions or contradictions in a market and future possibilities. Unless we can answer questions at this level about, say, the personal care or leisure markets then we do not know what the future possible terrains might be that our future brand will be a part of.

A final analytic layer of 'strategic analysis' again maybe seen as *de rigueur* in virtually any qualitative brand evaluation or brand development research project. Here strategic analysis is about evaluating what all of this means in detail for the directions in which a brand can or cannot be encouraged to move. This involves asking a whole series of questions about the data and its meaning which focus upon what it tells us about the level of opportunity represented by different possible directions. It is also about identifying the underlying motivations it reflects, the brand characters and market structures that are implicit in it.

What is clear in the above is that each analytic step beyond that of raw data collation requires skill and rigour and an 'interrogational' attitude to what is being done. This is *not* a mechanical process in which automatically following a particular set of procedures will produce a flawless result. However, it is a process in which some specific analytic tools can be usefully applied. Here the various 'brand portraits' and 'brand models' examined in Chapter 3 are examples of particular analytic tools. Beyond these, 'market mapping' exercises for identifying the key dimensions by which consumers currently implicitly judge a market, and then plotting brands according to these, are also widely used analytic tools. A variety of need hierarchy or need sequencing tools are also often used to help

identify where existing and new brands can in some way begin to 'speak to' motivational areas that are currently unaddressed or only poorly served. Other analytic tools exist which have been designed to, for example, evaluate how innovative or distinctive a new brand offering actually is.

The key dimensions of the brand identified in Chapter 1 can be transformed into a valuable analytic tool that can be used in the evaluation of brand performance and, particularly, in strategic trouble-shooting. By examining what we know of a brand through the perspective of this or similar tools we can identify whether any brand is particularly weak or strong in terms of these key dimensions. Whilst it is not necessary or vital that a brand 'performs' in terms of all of these key dimensions, it is reasonably clear that a brand that provides strong authentication and differentiation will be less well placed competitively than a brand that performs well in terms of authentication and differentiation *and* caters to some vital consumer needs.

The key point about all of these and other analytic tools is that the processes they represent are an integral part of brand development research, but they are not market research in a formal sense. All of these tools are actually representations of an *intellectual or thinking process*. But these thinking processes are not about somehow 'making it up'. The disciplines involved in developing and applying analytic tools and the presentation of these to others in some formal way is what makes qualitative brand development research an objective rather than subjective process. By capturing subjective meanings which brands have for groups of individuals and then formally analysing what these reveal about motivation, market dynamics and so on, and formally analysing this to generate strategic options, brand development research can be an objective process. The processes of data generation and thinking are visible and open to scrutiny, they can be evaluated for their logic and reasonableness, they can be challenged, they are vulnerable to contrary evidence.

INTERNATIONAL/MULTI-CULTURAL BRAND RESEARCH

The increasing significance of brands through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and into this new millennium is not just a single-country phenomenon, it is a worldwide phenomenon. Although dramatically more advanced in some parts of the world than others, consumer sensitivity to brands is an international fact of contemporary life. At a historical and sociological level we constantly hear about processes of '*globalisation*'. Within the marketing arena we are increasingly exposed to the idea of the '*superbrand*' – brands whose meaning and resonance works across cultures to capture large tracts of a world market whether this is in soft drinks, casual clothing, sportswear, hamburgers and so on. Globalisation and the superbrand are all parts of the same long-term development process.

Given this situation, it is likely that brand development research will increasingly be required to operate on some kind of international basis. As client companies increasingly organise themselves on an international basis, rationalise production and distribution on an international basis and seek to develop brands on an international basis, the writing is clearly on the wall for brand research in general and brand development research in particular. The issue for any would-be brand owner here is obvious: *'Why develop a brand in one country if it can be developed in ten?'* The fact that international brands exist demonstrates that they can develop or can be developed. From a research point of view, working at an international level heightens some of the issues that apply to qualitative research *per se*.

In Chapter 4 we identified five key problems that are fundamental issues that exist in brand research and which qualitative research endeavours to address.

To recap, these were:

- The problem of the withheld – revealing what respondents wish to hide.
- The problem of the unconscious – revealing motivations and so on which are hidden from respondents themselves.
- The problem of the taken-for-granted – revealing layers of meaning which have been acquired invisibly and remain implicit.
- The hermeneutic problem of meaning – revealing what respondents actually understand a question to mean and what is actually meant by their answer.
- The problem of prediction – revealing what the present can and cannot tell us about how people may respond in the future.

This same set of issues applies when conducting brand research projects at an international level. To some degree the ways of tackling these issues remain the same. The way that qualitative research projects are structured and the qualitative research techniques they employ must encourage respondents to feel at ease and share more of what they do know. They must encourage them to discover and reveal elements that are unconscious or taken-for-granted. They must adopt a style which constantly checks and adjusts meaning. They must maximise the respondents' ability to project out of the present into different 'futures'.

International or multi-cultural research has to address all of these issues, but all of these issues are made more pressing by the international setting. In part, the problems of international brand research are logistical and practical – organising and co-ordinating larger-scale projects in which larger numbers of market researchers/moderators, client marketers, local client personnel and so on are involved. These are mainly problems of scale and language. However, more fundamentally, international brand research also introduces a further key issue into the game; the problems of the cultural hermeneutic. This is an additional layer of hermeneutic

problem to that which exists in single-country brand research. In single-country brand research the hermeneutic problem is about identifying what is actually meant by a particular answer and what a particular set of visual links and varied associations with a brand actually mean. In multi-cultural research we are faced with the same hermeneutic problems, plus the problem of how to translate these out of local language and the local set of references and into some meta-language where the same sets of local references may not apply. This can create problems at the 'front end' of research where particular care is needed to ensure that *all* the inputs into research – recruitment questionnaires, stimulus materials, research techniques and their instructions for use, topic guides, research objectives and so on – approximate to one another. In turn such problems can carry through into the conduct of research itself. We need to avoid situations where in practice each country conducts a slightly different piece of research from every other country. Finally, and often here is the most significant problem of international brand research, there is the problem of analysis: how to 'translate' imagery, nuance and consumer meaning (which has already crossed a number of hermeneutic barriers) out of a number of different local languages into a core working language when it will often be the case that words, concepts and orientations in one language/culture will not have an equivalent in another. The real danger here is that the 'solution' to the problem is often to deny that it exists, to reduce everything to the lowest common directly translatable denominator.

Some defence against this cultural hermeneutic problem can be seen in the nature of qualitative research itself. In particular, the strong dependence of qualitative brand research upon qualitative techniques provides some defence against local researchers'/moderators' cultural biases or predispositions. Here, for example, the fact that consumers' written word associations around the word 'injection' in France contain far more references to pain than similar exercises in Germany tells us that:

- both cultures identify injections with ideas of pain; and
- French culture is more sensitive to it.

Research techniques are not an absolute solution to this cultural hermeneutic problem but do offer some protection. The way international brand research is organised can also provide some defence against this cultural hermeneutic problem. Here there are three basic models for the conduct of international qualitative brand research;

- **The remote participant method:** in which a project is designed centrally in one country, briefed out to local agencies, fieldwork is conducted locally and a local report created. Local reports are then synthesised into a single central report.
- **The consortium method:** in which a project is designed by a consortium of local country agencies (representing some or all countries

involved), local agencies conduct local fieldwork, but analysis and reporting are conducted on a consortium basis.

- **The central participant method:** in which a project is designed centrally in one country, by a central project team, fieldwork is conducted by local agencies but directed and overseen by a central project team member, and analysis and reporting are conducted by the central project team.

It is interesting that each of these approaches makes different implicit assumptions about where the problem issues are in conducting international qualitative brand development research. In the first approach, the remote participant method, the issues are assumed to be largely operational and organisational; so long as the fieldwork is conducted and reported according to effective central instructions, then the creation of an overview report is unproblematic. Whereas this 'remote participant method' side-steps the cultural hermeneutic problem, the 'consortium method' recognises it and tackles it head on. The problem here can be that the process needs very careful management in order to avoid becoming a kind of research by international committee in which there is much debate and insufficient responsibility. The 'central participant method' represents a further attempt to address problems of international brand research. Central control and observation of fieldwork means in effect that data collation, analysis and so on are conducted in the language of the controlling country. The risk here is that the central team member observing at the local level misses some nuances and some key local cultural dimensions.

Variations on all of these models can be seen in operation in international brand research. Again it is impossible to identify an optimum route amongst these. In part the effectiveness of each approach will be rooted in how it is executed as much as in the basic model itself. Additionally, given that each model carries different time and budget implications, each can fall short of the ideal if not given sufficient time to work or is not allocated sufficient resources.

THE FUTURE OF BRAND RESEARCH

The future of all marketing does not lie in the 'superbrand' route. The idea that the future will be entirely dominated by a few brands in any one market working at a truly international level is fatuous nonsense. What we can see in the present, accompanying the globalisation trend, is a coming together of economic forces and technical possibilities that make the 'superbrand' an alluring possibility in some markets. However, the long-standing existence of powerful international brands like McDonald's or Coca-Cola has not obliterated the existence of lesser competing brands that work across some cultures. 'Superbrands' have not destroyed the possibilities for more local brands to cater to local and specific needs in a way that the 'superbrand' cannot.

In the 1990s there was much commentary on the 'end of brands' in response to the development of lower cost 'own label' products within the supermarket sector. Whilst 'own label' was and is clearly a real phenomenon within the supermarket sector, it does not, with hindsight, represent some movement spelling the end of brands. With hindsight 'own label' looks like a particular evolution within the world of brands itself, in which the 'Tesco' own label, for example, has as much to offer some consumers at an emotional level as more traditionally branded goods. Similar processes can be seen at work for other groups of consumer, with Somerfield and other 'own labels' offering something different from Tesco's. The point in all of this is that the world of brands is, or can be, active, dynamic and competitive. What consumers are offered and respond to positively today may not be the same as what they respond to tomorrow. Tomorrow consumers may have found that they have new needs or are simply bored with what they did yesterday and feel like exploring something new. The trick in all of this is to find ways of encouraging consumers to see established brands as continuing to be relevant and finding ways in which new brands can tap into existing motivations in new ways, or of creating new motivations.

In the future some brands will strive to achieve 'superbrand' status and work at a truly multi-cultural level. However, this tendency is likely to also give rise to an 'equal and opposite reaction' of more local brands catering to local cultural diversity and the needs of some consumers to simply identify or express themselves as different in some way from other consumers. Much of what has been written in this book about consumers as active participants in the creation and evolution of brands suggests that as long as there is diversity within and between cultures then there is fertile ground for the development of new and different brands at local, national and international levels and for the re-framing and development of existing brands.

In this connection the Internet emerges as a key focus for debate at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Questions are regularly posed in terms of 'Will it change the nature of brands?', 'Will it change the nature of the human mind and human culture?' and 'Will it change the way that research is done?' The answer to all of these questions is probably 'Yes', but the question in each instance should be 'How much?' and 'Will it alter the fundamental character of these things?' At this point in history it is clear that the Internet and the technology surrounding it will change some aspects of everyday life, changing some of them quite profoundly. However, alongside these changes human mind and human culture (and brands as a part of this) bring with them their own fundamentals which are the 'stuff' that the Internet will have to work with. Ultimately what the Internet may offer is not so much a whole new mind or a whole new culture, but additional avenues and vehicles for brands, and additional opportunities through which research can explore brands.

DYNAMIC BRAND MANAGEMENT

In this book we have spent a great deal of time exploring the definitions and meanings of brands, branding and brand terminology. We have looked at the relationships that consumers have with brands and the consequent utility of qualitative research in exploring brands. To bring us back almost full circle, it is useful to reflect briefly on why it is so important to develop and manage brands successfully. The answer is 'monetary value'. This simple truth may be expressed with reference to acquisitions and balance sheets (Laforet and Saunders 1994), brand equity (Irmscher 1993), profit, capitalism etc., but in the end it all comes down to that simple truth summed up by Blackett and quoted in Chapter 1. It bears repetition:

Brands can acquire considerable value as long as they are kept in good shape by their owners and continue to offer consumers the qualities they require. (1992: 70)

In order to understand the contribution that qualitative research can make, we need to make an observation on the process of branding. The general consensus in the research industry and amongst branding consultants seems to be that branding is an open-ended and on-going process – it is never complete. Whilst you may arrive at an agreed 'blueprint' for a particular brand, this will need to subtly change and develop over time in order to remain relevant within the changing environment around it. Moreover the process of executing the brand strategy needs constant evaluation and periodic revision to ensure that it maintains its long-term relevance.

If we take this on board, then research should be viewed as an intrinsic element of the branding process; rather than simply informing brand development, it becomes embodied in the process of branding itself.

This in turn has important implications for the role of qualitative research. More often than not the qualitative researcher is portrayed as simply the supplier of ad hoc research; a dealer in insight and understanding. The good researcher illuminates the world of the consumer while flitting between the boardroom and the 'real world' without truly residing in either. This view, although reflecting a partial reality, undervalues the role that research could play as an equal partner in brand management.

The risks associated with an exclusively internal approach to brand management have long been recognised. A plethora of commentators point to the high turnover of brand managers (Irmscher 1993), lack of strategic thinking (de Chernatony and Riley 1997) and a short-term focus on building market share rather than the brand itself (de Chernatony and Riley 1997). Within an increasingly competitive environment and with

internal brand management under pressure due to lack of time, there is increasing room to explore the role of researcher as guardian of the brand versus as ad hoc supplier.

KEY POINTS

The nature and character of brands makes their development through qualitative research a distinctive territory in which some of the issues found more generally in qualitative market research are crucial.

- The 'information' derived from brand research is particularly sensitive to research design and therefore particular consideration needs to be given to issues here.
- The nature of brands cannot be captured through pure reportage and so the role of analysis is central in brand research.
- The potential for brand development and brand change can only be accessed through analysis of research results. It is not often self-evident in those results.
- Moves towards increasingly international brands and brand management introduce new issues about cross-cultural research and how it maintains sensitivity.
- In the future brands will continue to exist at local, national and international levels, just as they will exist and be negotiated in different media.

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