

Innovative products to fulfil the promise of great brands

Alastair MacGregor, *Innovia Technology*

At long last brands are taking their place on corporate balance sheets. This recognises their central role in creating shareholder value. Strong brands are a key to the competitive advantage of companies from Jaguar and Shell to Boeing and Coca-Cola. Brands also give customers confidence as they explore a world of new products.

Yet the world is an uncertain place for brand managers. Customers can all too easily be dazzled by the latest market debutantes. Well-established products are left behind in a matter of months by a blur of change. Buying decisions are increasingly sophisticated, informed by a clamour of eager internet buying guides and product comparators.

So what does it take to keep brands fresh, successful and relevant, at the forefront of customers' minds? Vital to success is an ability to spot links between **core brand values** and **positive customer experiences**. Those experiences are brought to life in **innovative products**, animated by technology.

Core brand values are typically expressed in terms of a small number of words: an up-market hi-fi brand might define its core value as 'individuality and soul'. It is often left to engineers and designers to interpret and express those values in products. Yet, if those values are really to count in the battle for customer attention, it is important to understand what the words mean in the context of the brand, how they differentiate you from your competitors, and how they should be made manifest in the products.

Positive customer experiences are the fulfilment of brand promises. To maximise the impact you make on customers, it is important to explore the full richness of the context in which

the product is used, focusing particularly on benefits which customers experience. Recognise that some customers may not perceive the product the way you do. The Sun Microsystems chairman, Scott McNealy, recently rattled the automotive industry with his remark that cars are 'nothing more than Java browsers with tyres'. One technique which is particularly valuable for this exploration is benefit mapping – a process which explores the spectrum of rational and emotional benefits a product delivers. Figure 1 is an example benefit map for a hair-care product.

Innovative products deliver appropriately-identified benefits using the best **technology** – **from any source**. Often technologies that have most power to break the paradigm come from outside the existing industry structure and supplier base. Speedo demonstrated this effectively at the Sydney Olympics with its Fastskin costume inspired by shark skin.

To identify a broad range of suitable opportunities for developing your brand, you build coherent and credible links between each of these components. This is shown as three processes in Figure 2, which is for a fictitious car marque with core brand values of 'luxury and power'. Each component acts as a starting point to build appropriately aligned links to the other two. Sometimes it is important to run one process in successive iterations, in order to refine the link and make it more compelling. Working through all three processes helps to overcome limiting assumptions about the best way forward and to move beyond gaps in understanding.

The **customer-initiated process** links experiences that are important to customers to core brand values and then shows how they can be

realised through technology – in this case, active noise cancellation pampers the customer, helping to lower stress levels.

The **brand-initiated process** shows how core brand values can be embodied in customer experiences that can be realised through technology – in this case, side-looking radar can help customers experience the power core brand value through safer overtaking.

The **technology-initiated process** explores how enabling technologies can help create customer experiences that reinforce core brand values – in this case, optically variable pigments can be used to express the power core brand value.

Taken together, this process generates a portfolio of opportunities for taking the brand forward that need to be prioritised using objective criteria. Typical examples of criteria include the degree to which you are better able to exploit the opportunity than your competitor, ability to protect technology used in the product through patents, strength of positive response in market tests, cost and risk.

To implement this approach in a company, the different facets of the whole process need to be reflected in the team responsible for its success. Key contributors will typically be drawn from research and development, manufacturing, strategy, and marketing, sales and brand management. Full benefit from the team's buy-in and insight requires collaboration from conception to implementation.

No one knows the future, least of all in a time of fast-paced change. But fusing brand, customer experience and product will give you the best return on your assets today and the insights needed for continued success in years to come.



Figure 1

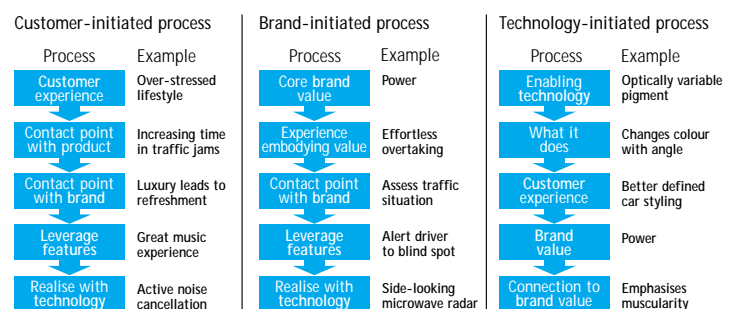


Figure 2: Examples of ways to link brand, customer experience and product