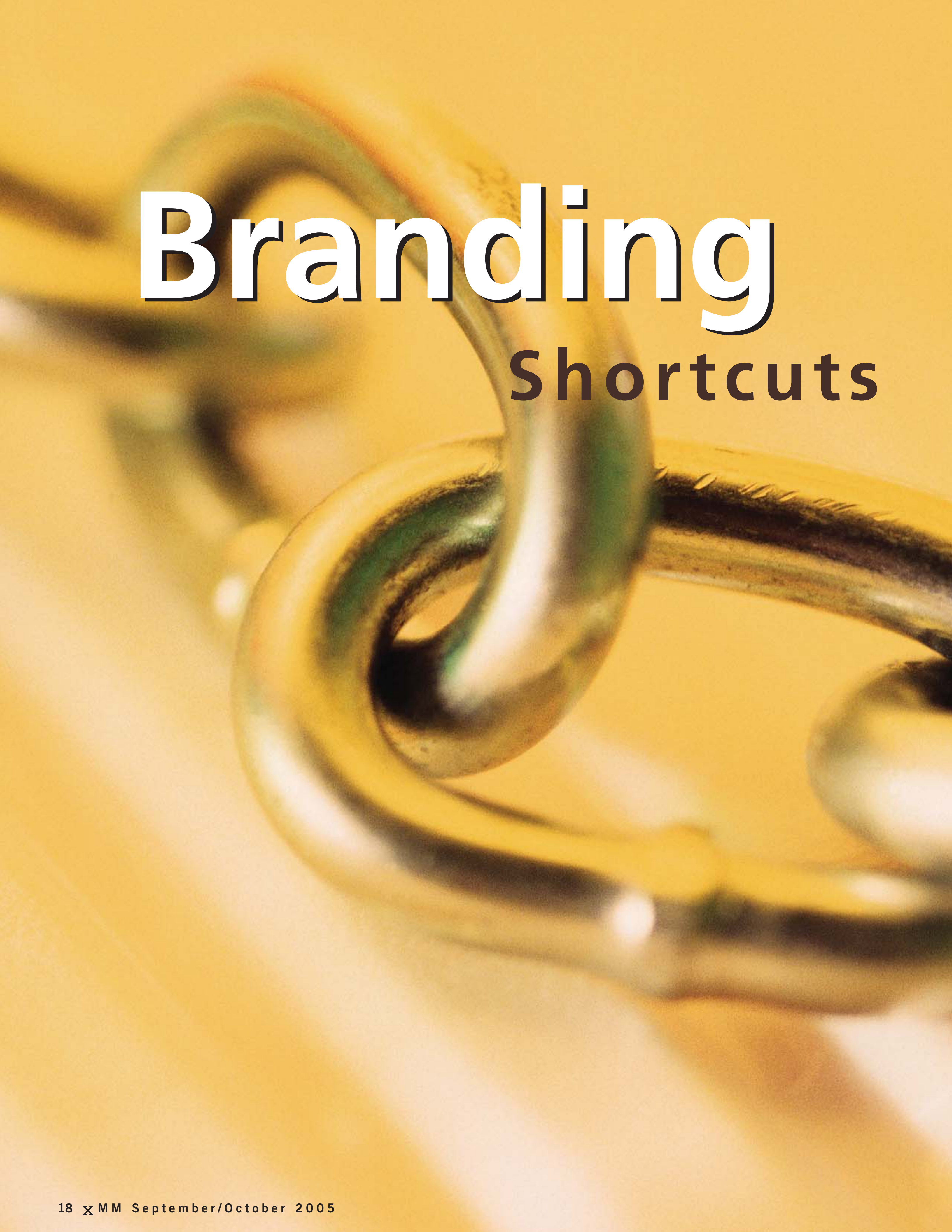
Branding
Shortcuts



BY KEVIN LANE KELLER

Choosing the right brand elements and leveraging secondary associations will help marketers build brand equity.

Today's challenging and unforgiving marketplace makes brand building difficult. Fickle consumers, intense competition, demanding retailers, constrained resources, and impatient investors put unparalleled pressure on marketers to skillfully design and execute their programs. As a result, marketers welcome any means toward helping them build brand equity and value.

Marketers build strong brands by creating the right brand knowledge structures with target consumers. This ensures that consumers are sufficiently aware of the brand and that they have strong, favorable, and unique associations with it. There are many associations that marketers may link to the brand, such as thoughts, feelings, perceptions, beliefs, images, attitudes, experiences, and behaviors. And the right brand knowledge structures can result in an array of benefits, including generous price premiums, intense and active customer loyalty, significant cost savings, and numerous brand extension and licensing opportunities.

This knowledge-structure building process depends on all brand related contacts, whether marketer initiated or not. From a marketing management perspective, however, there are three main sets of brand equity drivers.

EXECUTIVE briefing Marketers must employ every possible tool to quickly and inexpensively create brand equity. They should skillfully choose brand elements (names, Web URLs, logos, symbols, characters, slogans, jingles, packaging, and signage) and leverage secondary associations, which link the brand to people, places, or things with their own associations. This article outlines how these shortcut approaches work, as well as some important considerations.

- **The choices for the brand elements or identities.** This includes names, Web URLs, logos, symbols, characters, slogans, jingles, packaging, and signage. Besides its catchy name, Snapple has other valuable brand elements that build brand equity: unique, wide-mouthed bottles with colorful graphics and catchy names for their teas and juices, such as "Very Cherry," "Mango Madness," and "What-A-Melon"; slogans such as "Made from the Best Stuff on Earth" and "The Best Stuff Is in Here"; and Wendy, the down-to-earth, friendly receptionist who served as the advertising spokesperson.

- **The product and service and all accompanying marketing activities and programs.** Starbucks' marketplace success has resulted from a series of well designed and well executed marketing activities and programs, including a variety of high quality coffee products, controlled retail distribution, motivated and trained employees, provision of a sensory-rich retail experience, and positive word of mouth and publicity.

- **Other associations marketers indirectly transfer to the brand by linking it to another person, place, or thing.** In Subaru's ads, it used the rugged Australian outback and actor Paul Hogan of *Crocodile Dundee* fame to craft the image of its Subaru Outback cars and sport-utility vehicles (SUVs).

Without question, the second set is the central brand equity driver, since at the heart of marketers' brand building efforts are products and services and the associated pricing, distribution, and communication strategies. The first and third sets, however, can make a fundamental impact on brand equity. They are critical contributors because they typically represent less expensive options. Ensuring those two sets provide maximum return can be tricky, though.

Choosing Brand Elements

A number of brand element options exist, and a number of criteria are relevant for choosing the right ones. A brand element is "trademarkable" visual or verbal information that identifies and differentiates a product or service. The most common ones are names, logos, symbols, characters, slogans, and packaging. Independent of decisions they make about the product or service and how it is marketed, marketers can choose brand elements to build brand equity—to enhance consumers' brand awareness or facilitate their formation of strong, favorable, and unique brand associations.

Brand elements are vital because many consumers do not examine much information in making their product decisions, and because brand elements can reduce the burden on marketing communications.

There are six criteria for choosing brand elements, each with specific considerations. The first three focus on how marketers can build brand equity. The last three are more defensive, and concern how marketers can leverage and preserve brand equity in the face of different opportunities and constraints.

Memorability. How easily can consumers recall the brand element? How easily can they recognize it? Is the brand element memorable at both purchase and consumption? Short names such as Tide, Crest, and Puffs can help.

Meaningfulness. How credible is the brand element, and how suggestive is it of its product category? Is it descriptive and persuasive? Does it indicate something about an ingredient or the type of person who would use the brand? Consider the meaning in names such as DieHard (auto batteries), Mop & Glo (floor wax), and Lean Cuisine (low calorie frozen entrees).

Likability. How aesthetically appealing is the brand element? Is it fun and interesting? Concrete names such as Sunkist, Spic And Span, and Firebird evoke rich imagery to evoke these qualities.

Transferability. Can marketers use the brand element to introduce products in the same or different categories? Can the brand element cross geographic and cultural boundaries and market segments? Volkswagen named its new SUV "Touareg," after a tribe of colorful Saharan nomads. Unfortunately, these nomads were notorious slave owners, which created a press backlash in the United States.

Adaptability. How flexible and easy to update is the brand element? General Mills has given Betty Crocker more than eight makeovers through the years. Although she is 84 years old, she doesn't look a day over 35!

Ability to be protected. Can marketers legally protect the brand element? Can they shield it from the competition, or can others easily copy it? It is important that names synonymous with product categories—such as Kleenex, Kitty Litter, Jell-O, Scotch Tape, Xerox, and Fiberglas—retain their trademark rights and not become generic.

And because different brand elements have different advantages, it is important to "mix and match" them to maximize their collective contribution to brand equity—to choose different brand elements, and to design some brand elements to be mutually reinforcing and share some meaning. Most strong brands employ multiple brand elements. Nike has the distinctive "swoosh" logo, the empowering "Just Do It" slogan, and the name taken from the winged Greek goddess of victory.

Often, the less concrete brand benefits are, the more essential it is for brand elements to capture these intangible characteristics. Many insurance firms use symbols of strength, security, or a combination of the two: Prudential uses the Rock of Gibraltar, Hartford uses the stag, Allstate uses their "good hands," Travelers formerly used the umbrella, Fireman's Fund uses the hard hat, and Fortis formerly used the castle.

Characters are also useful. The Keebler elves reinforce home style baking quality and a sense of magic and fun for their line of cookies. Geico's gecko helps create a friendly identity for the No. 5 brand in the sometimes intimidating auto insurance category.

A powerful but sometimes overlooked brand element is slogans. Like names, slogans are an extremely efficient, shorthand means of building brand equity. They function as useful "hooks" or "handles," helping consumers grasp the brand and what makes it special. Slogans are an indispensable means of summarizing and translating a marketing program's intent. Think of the meaning in slogans such as "Like a Good Neighbor, State Farm Is There," "Nothing Runs Like a Deere," and "Help Is Just Around the Corner" (True Value).

The best test of a brand element's contribution is what consumers would think about the product or service if they knew only its name or logo, for instance. Based on only their names, a consumer might expect ColorStay lipsticks to be long lasting, SnackWell products to be healthful snack foods, and Beautyrest mattresses to provide a comfortable sleep.

Secondary Associations

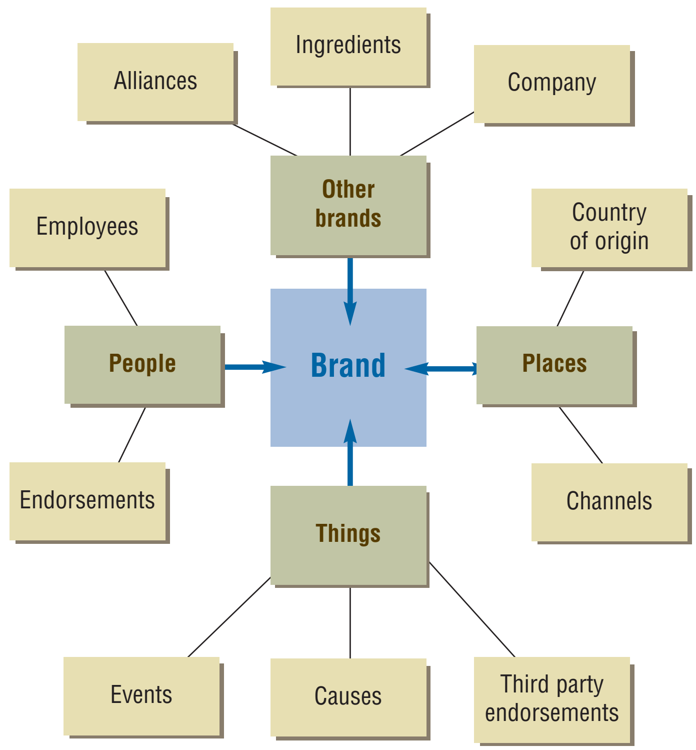
Another way to build brand equity is to leverage indirect or "secondary" associations, to link the brand to an entity with its own associations. (See Exhibit 1.) Marketers may link the brand to:

- the company, through branding strategies.
- countries or geographic regions, through identification of product origin.
- channels of distribution, through channel strategy.
- other brands, through ingredients or co-branding.
- characters, through licensing.
- spokespeople, through endorsements.
- sporting or cultural events, through sponsorship.
- third party sources, through awards or reviews.

In essence, the marketer is borrowing other associations. Because consumers can identify the brand with another entity, they may infer the brand shares associations with that entity—even if it does not directly relate to it.

Exhibit 1

Secondary sources of brand knowledge

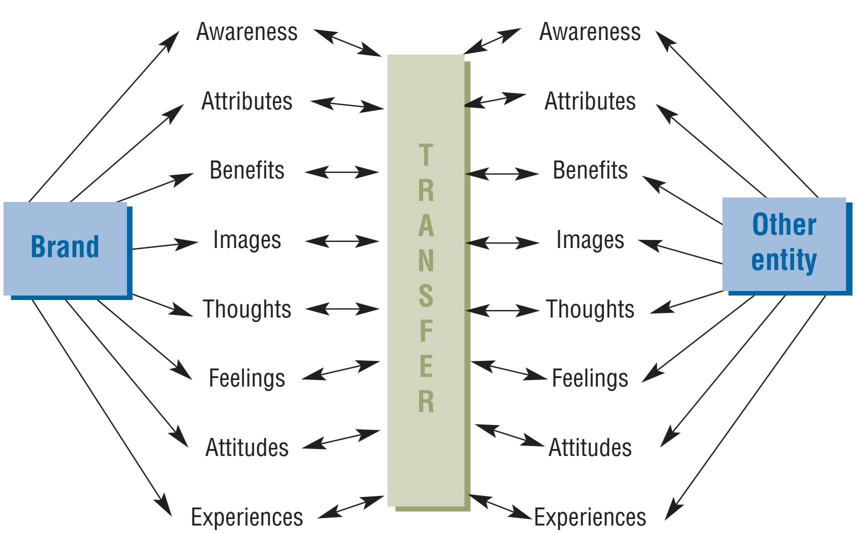


Burton, a manufacturer of snowboarding equipment, controls more than one third of its market by closely aligning itself with professional riders and creating a strong, national, amateur snowboarding community. Suppose it decided to introduce a tennis racquet called the "Dominator." In creating the marketing program to support the racquet, Burton could attempt to leverage secondary associations in a number of ways. Burton could:

- leverage consumers' favorable associations with the corporate brand by sub-branding the racquet—calling it "Dominator by Burton."
- leverage its rural New England origins, but such a location would have little relevance to tennis.
- sell through upscale, professional tennis shops and clubs, hoping their credibility would rub off on the Dominator.
- co-brand by identifying a strong ingredient brand for its grip, frame, or strings—as Wilson did by incorporating Goodyear tire rubber in the soles of its Pro Staff Classic tennis shoes.
- find one or more professional players to endorse the racquet (since it is doubtful that Burton could effectively leverage a licensed character that reflects the product). The company could also sponsor tennis tournaments, even those of the Association of Tennis Professionals or the Women's Tennis Association.

■ **Exhibit 2**

Understanding transfer of brand knowledge



- secure and publicize favorable ratings from third party sources, such as *Tennis* magazine.

Understanding Leveraging

In general, secondary associations are most likely to affect consumers' evaluations of a product when they lack the motivation or ability to judge it on a deeper level. In other words, when consumers don't care about choosing a particular brand or feel they don't possess the knowledge to choose the appropriate brand, they may make decisions based on secondary considerations—such as the country from which the product came or the store in which the product is sold.

Three factors can predict how much leverage will result from secondary associations.

Consumers' knowledge of the entity. If consumers have no familiarity with the entity, then obviously there is nothing that they can transfer. Ideally, consumers will be aware of the entity and hold some strong, favorable, and unique judgments and feelings about it.

Meaningfulness of consumers' knowledge of the entity. To what extent do consumers deem this knowledge relevant for the brand? The meaningfulness may vary depending on the brand and product context. Some associations may seem valuable for the brand, whereas others may have little connection.

Transferability of consumers' knowledge of the entity. To what extent will consumers link this knowledge to the brand?

Theoretically, marketers can transfer any associations from entities to the brand. (See Exhibit 2.) However, some entities create or affect certain kinds of brand knowledge more than others. For example, events are especially conducive to creating experiences, people are especially effective for eliciting feelings, and other brands are especially well suited for establishing particular attributes and benefits. At the same time, marketers may link any entity with multiple associations, each of which can affect brand knowledge directly or indirectly.

Linking the brand to a cause—think Avon's Breast Cancer Crusade—can have multiple effects on brand knowledge. A cause marketing program can build brand awareness via recall and recognition; enhance brand image with attributes such as user imagery (e.g., to evoke kind and generous) and brand personality (e.g., sincere); trigger brand feelings (e.g., social approval and self-respect); establish brand attitudes (e.g., credibility judgments such as trustworthy and likable); and create experiences (e.g., through a sense of community and participation in cause related activities).

A number of issues arise in understanding how the three leveraging factors operate according to the different entities and the different dimensions of knowledge involved. For example, understanding transferability becomes especially critical. In general, it may be more likely for judgments or feelings to transfer from the entity than more specific associations. Consumers tend to see many specific associations as irrelevant or too strongly linked to the entity.

This inferencing process largely depends on the strength of the consumer's connection between the entity and the brand. The more consumers see similarity between the entity and the brand, the more likely they will transfer their knowledge of the entity to the brand. And in terms of perceived similarity, marketers often design leveraging to provide complementary brand knowledge to shore up a negatively correlated attribute—for example, the youthful Tiger Woods' endorsement of the aging Buick brand.

Choosing Associations

Marketers may choose entities for which consumers see some or even a great deal of similarities. This "commonality" leveraging strategy makes sense when consumers have associations with another entity that are congruent with desired brand associations. Consider New Zealand, which the public knows for having more sheep than people. A New Zealand sweater manufacturer that positioned its product on the basis of its "New Zealand wool" presumably could more easily establish strong, favorable, and unique brand associations.

On the other hand, there may be times when marketers choose entities representing a departure for the brand because there are few, if any, similarities. Such branding strategies can be critical to delivering the desired brand associations. The challenge is for marketers to ensure means of transferability, so the consumer's less congruent knowledge of the entity has a direct or indirect effect on existing brand knowledge. This requires skillfully designed marketing programs that overcome initial consumer confusion or skepticism.

Even if consumers buy into the association, leveraging secondary associations may be risky, because marketers give up some control of the brand image. The other entity will undoubtedly have a host of associations, only some of which the marketer will find interesting. It may be difficult to manage the transfer process so that consumers link to the brand only the relevant secondary associations. Moreover, this knowledge may change over time: As consumers learn more about the entity, new associations may or may not be advantageous for the brand.

Understanding Structures

As marketers try to squeeze more value out of fewer dollars in their budgets, they must closely examine their activities and programs for effectiveness and efficiency. To ensure marketers are realizing maximum value from skillfully choosing brand elements and leveraging secondary associations, it is useful to conduct brand elements and secondary association audits.

A brand elements audit identifies all relevant brand elements and evaluates them on the six choice criteria. Marketers would then make recommendations on whether to modify, delete, or add a particular brand element, and decide whether the collective contribution of the brand elements was satisfactory.

A secondary association audit characterizes all important entities marketers linked to the brand and evaluates their ability to affect brand equity according to the three leveraging factors. Marketers would then make recommendations on how to maximize the desired equity transfer and minimize the undesired.

In both audits, the starting point is a deep, rich understanding of the brand knowledge structures of consumers and other key constituents. Profiling these structures should reveal critical sources of brand equity. What associations does the brand elicit? This understanding provides a reference point for marketers to interpret the contribution of brand elements and secondary associations. They can then critique them on how much they add to or embellish brand awareness, enhance brand image, generate positive consumer judgments and feelings, and forge strong consumer bonds.

Brand elements and secondary associations are two brand building devices in every marketer's tool kit. Savvy marketers will ensure they get as much as possible out of each. n

Author's Note: This article is partially based on material in Kevin Lane Keller's book, *Strategic Brand Management* (Prentice Hall, 2002).

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