

Rise of the metq

Once thought a dying species, the mono-brand is being reinvented by users who version their own idea of the brand to meet their own belief systems, writes James Withey

The most authoritative definition of 'brand architecture', by the author David Aaker, is that it "organises and structures the brand portfolio by specifying brand roles and the nature of relationships between brands".

A monolithic brand architecture is a system in which only one brand is specified, to cover all products or services offered, and to cater for all audiences. In truth, few brand architecture systems are entirely monolithic, but only in so far as the exceptions prove the rule.

A monolithic brand architecture system was, for much of the nineties and the noughties, the most likely outcome of a brand architecture review. To build strong brands, optimise marketing investment and maximise global reach, the answer was, most of the time, mostly monolithic. Even when local understanding and relevance was recognised as mattering a lot, the response was to create a 'glocal' strategy of ubiquitous understanding, accompanied by a monolithic face to market - HSBC being the classic example. Global was good, monolithic the mainstay of brand architecture.

The tide has been turning, however. After two years of the most dramatic evidence that an interconnected, globalised world can compound failure, rather than paving the way to growth without end, the prevailing context for decision-making about brands has been recast and, suddenly, monolithic architecture models have become unfashionable. It would be no great exaggeration to say that we appear to have been witnessing the strange death of the monolithic brand:

Starbucks has begun to open inspired by Starbucks' coffee shops without any significant Starbucks branding. Tesco has taken its own brand label off a tranche of its products, replacing the Tesco brand with myriad 'value brands at Tesco'. Marks & Spencer has departed from its single-minded own-label only strategy and is now offering a host of other 'favourite' brands on the shelves of trial stores

Niche, nuanced, bespoke offerings are

making waves. Big companies, such as Nike, have recognised this trend, snapping up relatively niche brands, such as Converse, to cater for consumers who have not bought into the big brand in the portfolio. The monolith has appeared increasingly unfashionable in the boardroom and the living room alike, a relic of the pluralistic age of broadcast; a vessel for mass messages, untargeted and disengaging.

ADDRESSING EVERY NEED

The future seems to lie with the players who have driven segmentation-led architecture models, the portfolios with a brand for every need, and every consumer typology. Small is the new big, nimble the new consistent. The response to the monolith as a structure living beyond its time has been to proliferate sub-brands. From the LG Chocolate to the Blackberry Bold, it seems every mobile handset gets its own brand name, every segment its own tag and logo.

All this proliferation notwithstanding, the death of the monolithic model seems especially strange at a time when the imperative to maximise marketing investment is keener than ever. It can be argued that the monolithic system suffers not from a terminal malaise, but from a malaise of terminology.

Issues of terminology run right through the lexicon of brand architecture. The very notion of architecture implies a rigid approach to branding - plan it, build it, secure it, specify points of entry on the terms of the owner - and an ingrained assumption rooted in the age of broadcast branding: 'Build it, and they will come.' Rather than adopting the brand prolific system, however, we can begin to address the assumptions that lie behind brand architecture and brand management at large by redefining the monolithic system.

Moving away from a monolithic system and to a brand prolific system actually misses the point. Building a whole city of houses to deal with ever-fragmenting segments simply downsizes one big problem and relocates it to

monolithic brand



LG's Chocolate mobile phone range exemplifies the proliferation of sub-brands

a host of smaller problems. The reality is that consumers will increasingly demand to get their hands on the blueprints, to create their own individual versions of the brands they buy into. Proliferating the portfolio can never address this demand, simply because it is not feasible to create a sub-brand to address every individual consumer.

If consumers want to create individualised versions of a brand, it makes sense to offer this to them under the aegis of one brand. The brand architecture of the tariff plans of Orange and 3 provide an instructive example. The former has invited its customers to decide which one of four anthropological boxes they fit into, and assigned to them a sub-branded tariff accordingly. Rather than offering Raccoon or Dolphin as sub-brands, 3 simply invites consumers to buy into 3 and then to 'mix and match' their own plan, navigating and versioning its products and services for themselves without any

requirement for 3 to recourse to sub-branding.

Of course, giving consumers the ability to create their own product mix is nothing new. Woolworths was doing it years ago with Pick'n'Mix, and Jones Soda has been inviting consumers to suggest flavours and pack designs for a decade. Putting decisions in the hands of the user community has, however, really taken off in the past couple of years: Starbucks launched 'My Starbucks Idea' in 2008 and to date, 70,000 ideas have been generated; IBM has launched an interactive ideas platform: 'Building a Smarter Planet'; and iGoogle is not branded in a completely monolithic way (is the 'i' really necessary?), but it is an example of a brand that exists specifically to facilitate versioning. Not only can the user assemble their own variant of Google (30% of users chose to customise their template), but they can also dress it for themselves

As Dan Schawbel has observed in *Me 2.0*, consumers have become very adept at

brand-managing their own profiles online. They are now becoming equally well-versed in managing their favourite brands for themselves. However, if consumers are to take charge of the architecture of a brand, to redecorate it, extend it as they please, even knock down the walls, that only increases the importance of having a central idea that is compelling enough for consumers to wish to invite themselves around. This idea must be engaging enough for consumers to take to their hearts and version for themselves, and yet distinctive enough to be recognisably a particular house - even when the nameplate is missing and the front door is repainted by every visitor.

When brand identity becomes a medium for the individual to express himself/herself, rather than a medium for consistent expression of the brand, the scope for managing perception through a portfolio of different sub-brands becomes very limited. Fragmentation and power transfer does not

necessitate brand proliferation - in fact, it dictates against it.

So if the age of broadcast has ended, if the command and control monolith is a relic, this makes it even more important that brand owners ensure the brand they are responsible for has one clear, simple, distinctive idea at its beating heart. This needs to be the kind of idea that can be stretched in multiple directions by multiple individuals without breaking it; a monolithic idea that is also flexible and stretchable.

Think of the most powerful brand ideas for a moment - 'Just Do It' (Nike) or 'Think Different' (Apple). These ideas are inherently consequential, but the precise consequence is up to the individual to determine for him or herself. The more a brand idea can be owned by its audiences, the more the brand will have a powerful, ownable idea.

This all starts to sound rather more reassuring for the brand owner and the brand manager. The brand idea is more important than ever, and the brands we all knew were the strongest anyway have renewed legitimacy. Perhaps the challenges to branding posed by the digital revolution are not so fundamental after all.

RELINQUISHING CONTROL

However, there's a problem. Conventional brand management is, to a large degree, about control. Suffering from a lack of relevance? Launch a branded energiser! Yet all the trends discussed here run counter to control. 'Versionable branding' necessitates a new approach to brand management.

If audience ownership of a brand is an increasingly important means of achieving audience engagement, the implication is that brands need to trade off control for connection. It is legitimate to question how valuable or viable control will be for brands in the future - there may be little in the way of control for brands to actually trade off.

A new, 'open source' approach to brand management presents a potential way forward. Rather than casting around for directions as to how to engage audiences or how to extend the brand, a brand manager can ask these questions of the audience which is busily interacting with the brand, get answers, build on those answers, go back, ask questions



Marmite has built an ongoing dialogue with its fans - the 'Mamarati' - to get feedback on extension ideas, such as Guinness and Champagne variants

again, and so on, until the next step for the brand has been defined, iteratively and engagingly. This approach to innovation and communication can be continuous and, as the dialogue bears fruit, mutually reinforcing.

Marmite has built an ongoing dialogue with its fans - the 'Mamarati' - getting feedback on extension ideas, and rewarding them with secret events and special editions. Even a misstep can provoke further engagement, as Amazon found early on when it attracted concern for mixing up publisher paid-for promotions with user reviews, but was able to course-correct by listening and learning. When a brand learns lessons from its user community, there is a good chance the community will rally around the brand.

A similar open approach can be used to engage audiences and build the brand internally. For years, we have heard that brand management is the responsibility of the organisation at large. However, beyond being actors sticking to the brand script or, in more enlightened organisations, improvising on it, how much input have employees really had to the brand they represent? Involving employees in building the brand by using them to help make decisions as to how to engage and extend the brand in the wider world makes perfect sense as a tactic to promote ongoing emotional ownership internally, and as a strategy for getting the best ideas out of those people who really know the brand from the inside out. Just look at Google.

The implications for brand architecture of this new, open approach to brand management serve to reinforce the return to a more monolithic model. Using one brand makes it easier for a community to cohere around it, to identify with it, and to identify their

community around it. There are fewer barriers to ownership, and one common platform from which to version, so it is all the clearer to others in the community how a given consumer has versioned the brand.

With every brand user a brand manager, there's no great point inventing multiple sub-brands to manage relationships with them. Better to embody an irreducible, yet infinitely 'versionable' idea within one brand. The idea should be expressed as simply and as powerfully as possible, using a set of elements that is irreducible, not through consistent application, but through power and resonance, and which can be modulated and managed in real time by its audiences. Consider clarity of product and service identification and navigability - information architecture - as more important than the instruments of brand architecture. The idea the brand embodies the versions of the idea audiences create for themselves, and the experiential 'feel' of the channels the brand inhabits, should be considered the key signifiers of brand 'identity' - not structured names, logos and sub-brands.

The monolithic, mono-versioned brand is a dying species, but this does not mean portfolio proliferation is the answer. We are entering the age of the 'meta-monolith' - brands that are driven by an idea and an accompanying belief system, which together provide the spine for an 'idea architecture', the many different faces of which will be generated by audiences versioning the brand, not by the brand versioning itself into sub-brands. The monolith is dead - long live the monolith.

Selective sociability

We all do it. We spend the day at work being helpful and patient with our colleagues; we break out maximum wit and warmth for post-work drinks with our friends; then we get home and unleash the tired, grumpy monster within to the ones we really love.

With the advent of social media, and a relentlessly gregarious world, it's easy to feel we deserve some downtime from being... well, nice. And our family's job is to take the hit.

The problem is, brands do it too. And it certainly isn't our job to put up with their selective sociability. I have positive interactions with companies in social media every day. Whether organising some returns with a retailer's receptive Twitter feed, getting a frank answer to my question on their Facebook page, or unearthing a cheeky discount on Foursquare, I often come away optimistic about the effort brands are putting into being... well, nice to us all.

Then I have to actually talk to one of their staff, or venture into their shop, and the whole facade collapses. It's back to the same old sluggish call centre or sullen shop assistant, who obviously hasn't received the 'we've become social now' memo, and all the work that's gone into creating a human, transparent, responsive suite of presences online - training the staff to use the tools, opening the channels of communications between departments to facilitate quick content creation - is undermined; exposed as a tactic, not an ethos.

Word-of-mouth should be embedded into every point of connection between a consumer and the business, but many of them ghettoise their 'social' approach. As the author of *Trust Agents*, Chris Brogan, puts it: "We think about companies using social media and we name their one person assigned to the task... We're building a cluster of solo players out there on the field when what is necessary is a team methodology with all kinds of touchpoints, system connectors, and deeper communications/strategy channels."

In other words, integration and consistency are key. Yes, your staff should be as conversational as your blog or YouTube videos or Twitter feed - but so should your retail stores, your TV ads, your packaging, your direct mail, your sponsorship, your billing, your PR. Why should that group of

customers who choose to interact with you in social media have a more effective and inspiring experience than the others, who only use your stores or order through your catalogue? Moreover, good experiences at other touchpoints will always translate into digital WOM.

Instilling the spirit of good outreach isn't the only challenge. An essential part of effective socialising relies on being a good listener, but this is also often siloed, with any insights drawn from online conversation monitoring shared only between a select team at the top. Spreading the word about the company's WOM highlights the changes that need to happen across all departments - what people hate about your product design, or the glitches they've encountered with your software - but it can also be a terrific morale boost. It's amazing how many people mention specific members of staff or local stores where they have been treated particularly well.

EVERYONE'S CONSUMER-FACING

It isn't easy to get this cut-through. These 'social skills' never used to be a prerequisite for every job; some specialisms rely on the kind of narrow focus or cool objectivity that doesn't make for the most sensitive or community-minded folk. But, as Brogan says: "Every employee is now consumer facing."

That doesn't mean everyone has to conform to the same model of a chirpy, chatty young digital native, but it does mean that it is everyone's responsibility to think about how to build conversational elements into their own area of expertise.

This will take focused company-wide conversations and a layer of extra training. Digital strategist Linda Zimmer notes that: "Frank [Eliason] at Comcast has taken his knowledge of customer service and social media and meshed them together. This is key. Every professional needs to understand social media in their own context so they can interpret it into their profession and job. This, by the way, should be part of a social media director's job - educating." For smaller businesses, it might only take a few sessions with a skilled consultant to effect some major internal change.

The biggest shift, after all, is in thinking. We all know how to have a good conversation (when we're in the mood); we just need to learn to apply it consistently and professionally.

