

# Satisfy human needs

Brands should consider how they fare in meeting Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs pyramid when creating a meaningful marketing strategy

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**A**pple made a \$46.3 billion profit in the fourth quarter of 2011, a tech industry record. Its brand was worth the same as Peru's GDP in 2011, according to Millward Brown, making it the world's most valuable brand. In the same study, Nokia plunged 38 places down the list, to number 81. It lost \$1.4 billion in 2011.

Apple and Nokia sell the same types of products. So why is there such a difference in performance of their brands? The answer is that Apple offers their customers meaning beyond their actual products.

If you want to create a meaningful brand, you have to start by understanding consumers and their needs. Maslow's theory on the Hierarchy of Needs has been debated for the past 70 years, but it is still useful as a starting point, in my view.

Maslow suggested that people's needs can be organised in a pyramid, with the most basic at the bottom (Figure 1). Further up, the need for personal esteem and feelings of accomplishment take priority. To develop as individuals, we strive to move up the pyramid, to try and end up with self-actualisation - becoming everything that we are capable of becoming.

Maslow thought of self-actualisation as uncovering one's true self. But identity today is a fleeting thing, with individuals constantly reinventing themselves, partly through what they consume. In today's affluent societies, the pyramid may have become less relevant, as most consumers - even in a recession - are finding ways to focus on all the categories of needs at the same time. So it's more useful to consider Maslow's categories as a checklist where all boxes need to be ticked, rather than a strict hierarchy.

As marketers, we should use this checklist to ask ourselves: what needs does our brand respond to? Are we ticking all the boxes?

Many brands and products help consumers fulfil physiological and safety needs: selling food and water, providing a safe environment, helping consumers connect with loved ones. Luxury brands help build social status and self-esteem. But brands can

also provide something for consumers at the apex of the pyramid - to become a truly meaningful brand, it must aspire to help its customers attain self-actualisation.

In a 2009 TED talk, Simon Sinek explored the 'why' of brands. He argued that what's interesting for a brand to communicate is not what it does or how it does it, but rather why it does it. This is because 'why' a brand exists is far more inspiring and motivating for consumers than 'what' types of products the brand offers and what those products do. Buying something from a brand with a strong and clear belief adds value beyond the product. Consumers become associated with the values of the brand and can claim to share them; the brand's values become a reflection of us as individuals.

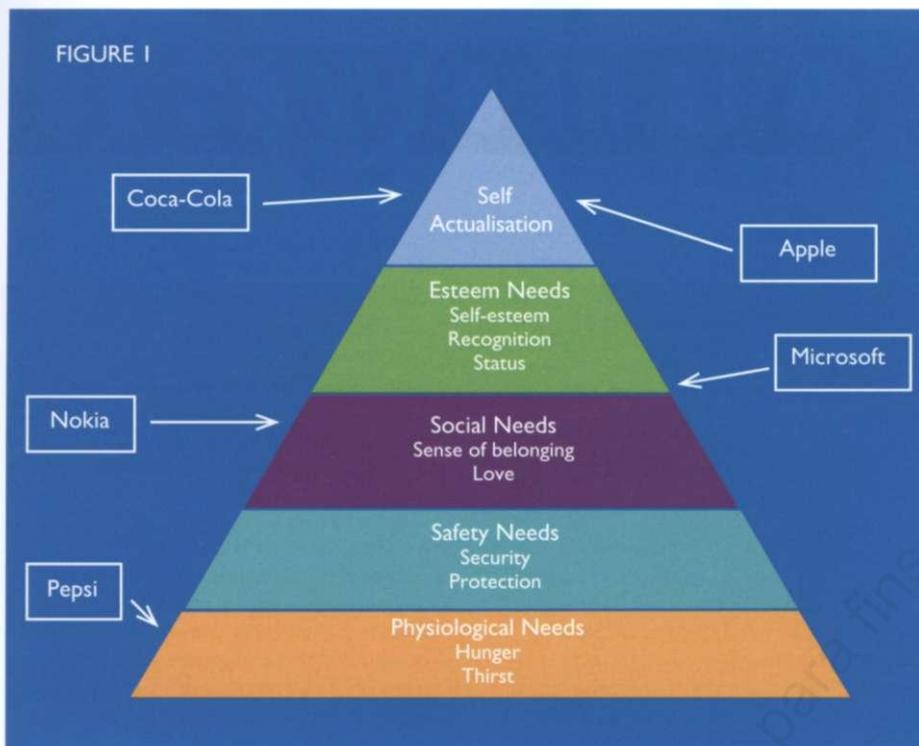
The difference between Apple and Nokia becomes clear when we plot the brands against the hierarchy of needs. Nokia has had its slogan 'connecting people' for 20 years, and even if it sells good products at competitive prices, it still focuses its marketing on the very basic function of the products - connecting customers to someone else. On Maslow's pyramid, such a message only reaches the middle.

In February last year, Nokia announced a partnership with Microsoft, Apple's arch enemy and another good example of a brand not reaching its full potential. Traditional Microsoft communication is also focused around the basic parts of the pyramid: what types of products it has and what the products do. With campaigns like the 2009 'I'm a PC and Windows 7 was my idea', it has tried to move up, but has not managed to respond to the consumer needs at the top of the pyramid.

Apple, on the other hand, has always been very clear about why it exists: as Steve Jobs once put it, Apple stands for "a belief that

"To become truly meaningful, a brand must aspire to help its customers achieve self-actualisation"

FIGURE I



people with passion can change the world for the better". When customers buy an iPhone, they too can claim that they are striving to change the world for the better. Apple helps them fulfil the highest level of the Maslow pyramid.

Consider the century-long battle between Coca-Cola and Pepsi. The brands sell (almost) the same product and target the same audience. Yet Pepsi has almost always been number two. This is in large part because Coca-Cola has, from its early years, focused on satisfying people's needs higher up the pyramid, compared with Pepsi. Their current respective positionings - 'Happiness' for Coca-Cola versus 'Refresh' for Pepsi - make the point.

Apart from sharing a vision, meaningful brands also physically enable people to do more and experience more. The highest potential for helping customers reach self-actualisation may, therefore, be in below-the-line communication. Through digital and social media and events, brands can create real value for their customers beyond the actual products they produce, by giving consistent experiences of the brand and what it stands for.

There are many ways in which a brand can enable its customers. It could be directly

linked to its products. American Express recently unveiled a partnership with Facebook and a new social platform that delivers deals tailored for card-holders based on their likes, interests and check-ins, as well as those of their friends. This way, American Express becomes more than just how you pay for a good time - it starts curating your experiences.

Or a brand's approach could go beyond products. In March 2011 after the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami, Coca-Cola and the Japanese Red Cross created a vending machine that, instead of selling drinks, accepted donations for humanitarian relief.

Adding true value to customers is a long-term commitment to understanding them as individuals and playing a more active role in people's day-to-day lives. The real success for Nike in the UK over the past couple of years has not been achieved through the company's above-the-line communication, but rather through a series of events, on and offline, aimed at runners, creating different ways for them to push themselves harder and develop as athletes. Beyond the sports gear and shoes, Nike also provides inspiration and motivation.

Parallel to, and intertwined with, consumers' needs, meaningful brands must

also satisfy their own needs. By extending the idea of 'the brand as a person', Maslow's theory could be applied to the brands themselves. For a brand to reach its full potential it would have to fulfil its own needs at every level of the pyramid. Let's look at Volkswagen as an example. A breakdown of the VW brand based on Maslow's categories would look something like this:

- Physiological needs - Volkswagen produces cars. The brand has access to all the manufacturing techniques and materials it needs.
- Security needs - the company provides a safe and rewarding environment for its employees, making them diligent and loyal.
- Social needs - VW cars are socially acceptable to drive. They also have good customer service, friendly dealers and so on.
- Esteem needs - people are proud to drive a VW car, feeling accomplished or smart (or whatever added benefit that one might associate the brand with). Journalists, regulators and other outside audiences recognise VW cars as 'high quality'.
- Self-actualising needs - VW goes beyond what they need to produce as a car manufacturer with campaigns like 'Fun theory', which addresses issues related to its cars, but in a way that connects the brand with a mission to improve the quality of life. It strives to have a positive impact on the environment, societies and communities as well as to improve individuals' quality of life.

VW would not have been credible in launching a campaign like 'Fun theory' if it had not successfully met its own and its customers' physiological, security, social and esteem needs. At the same time, it is the self-actualising element that gives the brand real meaning.

This is important to remember in austere times like these, where many brands opt to cut prices, communications and staff. Such measures might lead to a short-term increase in profits, but in the long run are damaging for the brand's image and hurt brand loyalty. How will the brand look on the other side of the recession? Short-sighted cuts jeopardise the overall experience of the brand and could especially hurt the motivational and inspirational factors associated with self-actualisation, both for customers and the brand itself.