

Research: Patronizing a big no-no for human brands

Research by Thomson deals with the question which factors lead to consumers developing a stronger bond with 'human brands'. Thomson coined the concept *human brand*, which involves applying a brand consisting of one persona to products, and can also be referred to as personality-led brands. The outcome of this research is not only relevant to the entertainment industry, but also to political parties and consumer goods that use personalities (with Jamie Oliver being a prime example).

The research concluded that when consumers feel attached to a brand, this will lead to higher levels of satisfaction and trust, and a stronger bond. Thomson also looked into the extent to which three specific factors can contribute to this sense of having a bond with a human brand: autonomy, relatedness and competence.

- **Autonomy:** the more a consumer feels a human brand enhances his/her feeling of autonomy, the more this consumer will feel connected to that human brand. Thomson included the autonomy factor in his study because other research had shown that teenagers only start feeling connected to their parents the moment they start feeling they have a say in family decisions. So where human brands are concerned, we can conclude that they should not be patronizing.
- **Relatedness:** the more a human brand makes people feel that it cares about the consumer, the stronger consumers' bond with that brand will be.
- **Competence:** the more competence a human brand exudes, the more inferior consumers will start to feel. Human brands should, therefore, make consumers feel that they are understood and appreciated, and that consumers are expected to make their own decisions (factor: autonomy). And human brands should also award consumers a feeling of acceptance, openness and belonging (factor: relatedness).

This research shows that a human brand can be very effective in strengthening the relationship between brand and consumer. But it is key for a human brand to come across as authentic. It also shows that human brands can have above-average effectiveness as an endorser (providing there is a pre-existing strong bond with the endorsing personality).

Extension of a relationship between a human brand and a consumer requires repeated interaction. This will reduce levels of insecurity and provides for a basis from which the relationship can grow. Companies should therefore make sure their human brand is accessible (chat sessions, weblogs, etc.). This will

sooner give the consumer a feeling of authenticity with the human brand, a sense that the personality is not playing a role.

Reference(s)

Thomson, M. (2006), Human brands: investigating antecedents to consumers' strong attachments to celebrities. *Journal of Marketing*, vol.70, July, p.104-119.*

* : available in the EURIB library.