

Does brand purpose really serve a brand purpose?

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Offers an alternative perspective and questions whether brand purpose serves a brand purpose.

- A recent study by Boston Consulting Group (BCG) indicates the profile and popularity of purpose may be dwindling (in the US, at least).
- There is an overlap between brand essence and brand purpose as they both support the idea surrounding 'what your brand is all about'.
- There is also considerable overlap between brand purpose and brand mission/vision.
- Corporate social responsibility plays a heavy part in informing a brand's purpose – particularly when sustainable brands are reaping the financial rewards.

Brand purpose is all the rage. It enjoys almost spiritual status among brand marketing believers who praise its virtues due to the business benefits it delivers¹.

But here's the rub. It's debatable if these business benefits are attributable to brand purpose or whether they're down to brand purpose masquerading as well-established brand, strategy or corporate social responsibility terms. If so, brand purpose may tarnish the already fragile c-suite credibility of branding professionals if it's perceived as pulling the wool over their eyes.

So this article goes against the brand-marketing mainstream. It offers an alternative perspective and questions whether brand purpose serves a brand purpose.

Understanding brand purpose

Brand purpose concerns why a brand exists. Its reason for being or fundamental premise. Deep and meaningful stuff. But deep and meaningful thinking is required if brands are to realise their full potential as valuable business assets.

Patagonia and Toms Shoes are cited as brands with a genuine purpose grounded in social responsibility and ethical norms. Similarly, Dutch bank Triodos has a strong, authentic purpose; it only invests in activities that

have a positive social and environmental impact. These brands have a track record of doing social good that span years, and in some cases decades, which gives their brand credibility many can only dream of.

But equating brand purpose purely with social good is an oversimplification. Premier Inn's purpose is 'Making guests feel brilliant through a good night's sleep'; for KPMG it is to 'turn knowledge into value', and at Barclays it's 'helping people achieve their ambition – in the right way'².

For these, and other 'purpose-driven' brands, the goods, services or experiences they deliver are a means to an end. They express brand purpose.

The rise and fall of brand purpose

A recent study by Boston Consulting Group (BCG) indicates the profile and popularity of purpose may be dwindling (in the US, at least)³.

Granted, data trends can be interpreted in different ways. But this trend is counter-intuitive to the purpose-driven mentality that increasingly flows through the veins of the brand marketing masses.

Is purpose now passé? Has it lost its lustre? Has the c-suite got wise? Have consumers got purpose fatigue?

Brand purpose is confusing and overlaps with brand values

Brand commentators outline how brand purpose should guide recruitment, strategy and a broad spectrum of operational and strategic business activities⁴. But if you've defined your brand values and they're properly embedded within your organisation, won't they do the same thing?

Here's a quick test: next time you see the word 'purpose' in the context of a branding article change it to 'values'. For example, 'We're guided by our brand purpose' becomes 'We're guided by our brand values'; 'We recruit people who align with our brand purpose' becomes 'We recruit people who align with our brand values'. I think you'll find this does the trick.

Another goal of brand purpose is to unify and encourage behaviour towards a certain goal. Isn't this what values do, via beliefs that shape certain behaviours? Rokeach⁵ made this point in 1973. To compel behavioural change you need to focus on cause not effect. Brand purpose advocates will make the case for brand purpose but why reinvent the branding wheel when values already do the job?

Purpose is also cited as driving performance via the customer and brand alignment of deeply held views or world perspectives. But previous research shows how personal values and brand values alignment drives performance⁶. The importance of alignment is not new news.

When brands need to take a stand on controversial issues, make tough decisions or recover from difficult situations brand purpose is often called upon to act as "our North Star" or "guiding light". Shouldn't you call on your values when you need to do this? Similarly, shouldn't your brand personality shape how your brand responds to certain situations or conducts itself in the face of adversity? The metaphorical use of brand personality to facilitate 'on brand' behavior has been established for some time⁷.

Overlap between brand essence and brand purpose also exists. Brand essence captures what your brand represents⁸. It's an abstract and illusive beast that can be difficult to articulate and apply it in practical terms. To make brand essence more concrete you may find it useful to consider brand essence as 'what your brand is all about'. Disney's brand essence is frequently cited as 'fun family entertainment'. In other words, Disney is all about 'fun family entertainment'. For decades, Disney's brand essence has acted as a "North Star", guiding what it does and how it goes about doing it. This enables Disney to profit from merchandise, amusement parks, cruises, movies and much more that are all about fun family entertainment. Similarly, the way Disney products and experiences are designed then delivered is characterised by fun family entertainment. So, if KPMG's purpose is to 'turn knowledge into value', doesn't this represent what the brand is all about? In other words, KPMG is all about turning knowledge into value. This is why it exists. If so, what does its purpose do above and beyond brand essence? The circular logic will put you in a spin.

Some marketing commentators feel brand purpose will morph into brand positioning⁹. In other words, purpose is accounted for by positioning. So the purpose of purpose is... ?

When considering brand purpose in the context of brand, it doesn't feel like there is enough daylight to help its unique contribution shine through. A solution could be to bundle your brand values, essence, personality, positioning etc., into one brand purpose statement. But doing this would confuse simplicity with simplification. As a result, you'd struggle to build a robust and rounded brand because it wouldn't converge on a central logic derived from several trails of thought.

Brand purpose: overlap with strategy

Classical strategic terms such as mission and vision are frequently confused or worse still used interchangeably. Either way when considered in this context the unique contribution brand purpose brings to the branding table becomes increasingly unclear. Mission and / or vision statements tend to have lofty aspirations detailing why the corporation exists and what it wants to achieve based on this premise. This sounds remarkably similar to brand purpose.

It was only the other week I was at a conference where the CMO of a reputable brand mixed corporate and brand purpose, mission, vision and values into a cocktail of confusion. This meant their talk drifted between different units of analysis (corporate/brand) and across them (purpose, mission, vision and values). Puzzling and depressing in equal measures.

Brand purpose: overlap with corporate social responsibility

Brand purpose is not synonymous with corporate social responsibility but it is common for brand purpose to be considered this way. Notwithstanding this point, brands have had a purpose beyond profit for decades. Johnson & Johnson's famed 'Credo' is an example of a socially driven brand purpose. It was written in 1943. Cadbury's roots were grounded in a strong moral commitment to the local community in Bourneville, Birmingham, UK. The company was founded in 1824. Joseph Rowntree (1836–1925), the philanthropist and businessman who founded the Rowntree confectionary brand, was famed for his social reform and charitable work. This indicates that the notion of an organisation and its operating model being guided by a socially driven ethos is not new. It feels like corporate social responsibility has been rebranded as brand purpose by branding professionals.

The relationship between brand purpose and financial performance is frequently highlighted in the marketing press. For example, 70% of Unilever's turnover growth is being driven by its sustainable brands that put purpose at the heart of their offer¹⁰. To simplify the debate and facilitate comparison, let's assume brand purpose equates to brands doing social good. The relationship between corporate social responsibility and financial performance was established some time ago in the CSR space¹¹. Why put CSR in the shadow of brand purpose when its contribution should be allowed to shine?

Brand purpose: summing up

I always read brand purpose articles with interest and an open mind. This is in the hope that the unique contribution brand purpose makes to the branding profession will become clear. Alas, I come back to the points outlined above. It's not for the want of trying. Believe me, I'm a keen student of brand marketing. But, it's difficult to see how brand purpose paves new ground. It feels more like walking a path paved with by brand, strategy or CSR folk – especially when they are combined.

But here's the bit that grinds. If branding professionals can't put daylight between brand purpose and well-established brand, strategy or corporate social responsibility terms it begs the question: what purpose does brand purpose serve?

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Darren has over 20 years brand marketing experience spanning Europe, the Middle East, South East Asia and Japan. He is the Managing Consultant of Wavelength Marketing. Wavelength specialises in helping services brands retain relevance through the experiences they build.

Johnson & Johnson, BUPA, Dubai Properties, Maybank, Orange, Ooredoo and PepsiCo are amongst the brands he has helped. Darren is frequently invited to deliver keynote talks at international conferences, moderate panel discussions, sit on expert panel boards and comment on brand-related issues in national and international media. He holds a PhD in services branding and recently authored *Building Brand Experiences: A Practical Guide to Retaining Brand Relevance*, published by Kogan Page for global distribution and his book will be translated into Korean and Mandarin in 2020.

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