Creating Valued Brands with a Digital Push

Building a strong brand is much more than consumers' exposure to your business. It encompasses all the experiences and interactions they have with your brand at various touch points – it could be visiting and interacting with your employees at a retail store; searching products on an e-commerce website; or scrolling through your social media pages. All these key touch points should be kept in mind while crafting a brand building strategy for a brand to succeed.

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More than just an impressive logo, a brand represents the perception about a company and its policies in the minds of consumers and has a direct impact on purchase, goodwill and loyalty.

Right branding holds enormous importance in enhancing the value of a business not only in upholding its existing consumer base but also in further expanding it.

As the conventional channels of brand building such as print media, advertisements, billboards, etc., take a backseat in the era of Instagram 'Reels' and Facebook 'Live', brands are able to carve a niche for themselves rather quickly. New age consumers are mostly devouring the brand-building content put out by companies on their mobile devices from the comforts of their homes. As per a social media usage survey[1] conducted by Goodfirms in 2019 with participants from across the globe, about 99 percent of respondents indicated that they use four or more social media platforms in a day. The top platforms listed were LinkedIn, Facebook, YouTube and Messenger. Visual content-photos, videos and memes, was the most posted and engaging content type on social media.

It would not be incorrect to say then that digital is driving new sources of competitive advantage, growth and value creation.

[1]https://www.goodfirms.co/resources/social-media-usage-user-habits-to-know

Two decades ago, nobody would have envisaged names such as Amazon, Uber or AirBnB. But thanks to the fast-paced digital era we live in, today, these are global enterprises to reckon with in e-commerce, urban mobility, and hospitality sector, respectively, in a short span of time. This has been made possible because of the contemporary digital tools of marketing and branding.

Increasing Digital Adoption: Nudge for Omnichannel

Much before the COVID-19 pandemic struck India, we were on a path to digital revolution as per the availability of data connectivity or data penetration. In 2020, India had nearly 700 million internet[2] users. According to a 2019 report[3], over 73 percent of India's total web traffic was being generated from mobile phones alone. The pandemic only made the consumer ecosystem move towards the digital mode a lot faster – be it for shopping groceries online, ordering food off delivery apps or making payments through digital wallets.

At Puma, we endorsed digital transformation much before COVID-19 and that proved beneficial for us in adapting to the changing world sooner. A digital strategy cannot be implemented overnight. In our experience, successful digital transformation rests on the foundation of a carefully crafted digital strategy, along with traditional tools to maximise competitive advantage, growth, profit and value – and then implementing it down to the last thread.

The shift towards digital will continue as consumers get used to the idea of not having to carry cash while stepping out to shop. The change in consumer behaviour is not limited to a specific age group. Nowadays, even senior citizens are adopting the digital way of living[4]. They, too, are discovering the convenience of making purchases and payments online, or virtually connecting with their loved ones, without having to step out due to fear of the coronavirus. Brands don't need to keep opening physical stores to gain market penetration.

For instance, at Puma, we do not need to go to 600 cities in India physically to gain penetration, because e-commerce can do a more sustainable expansion for us in tier-3 and tier-4 markets, or the local markets in tier-1 and tier-2 cities.

Will this shift affect offline shopping? Probably, not. Physical retail will have its charm. Even if we look at our present scenario where

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[2]https://www.statista.com/statistics/255146/number-of-internet-users-in-india/

[3]https://www.statista.com/statistics/558610/number-of-mobile-internet-user-in-india/

[4]https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/internet/pandemic-play-a-lot-more-mid-age-users-click-on-net/ article-show/78456139.cms?from=mdr

COVID-19 is still not completely under control, the number of people coming back to our stores is substantial. We have started registering growth in our business since the third quarter of 2020. One of the reasons consumers are coming back is because offline shopping is still considered a wholesome experience for an Indian family – almost like a cultural practice. Consumers would love to have those experiences back.

Secondly, irrespective of the experience we create online, consumers would not shun offline stores. Consumers expect to shop Puma as much in a brick-and-mortar store today as in an online one. Many consumers want to touch and feel a product before buying it. They want to interact with the sales team on the shop floor, ask them for their recommendations as well as compare different products physically. These are some of the factors that affect buying decisions which are unlikely to change because the option of online purchasing is now easily available. In other words, the growth of e-commerce will not take place at the cost of offline stores.

BRAND BUILDING IN THE ERA OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Over the past few years, the phenomenon of brand building has transcended boundaries and undergone a sea change, especially with the emergence of social media. If utilised correctly, social media is a powerful tool to connect with consumers. A brand can create valuable content and form priceless and everlasting connections with its consumers using the right resources and platforms.

A consumer, today, makes conscious choices fascinated by powerful social media campaigns as part of larger yet carefully designed marketing strategies. Here are some other factors that may influence consumer choices and result in a buying decision:

● Democratisation of Communication

If we dwell deeper into the evolution of brand building, we will see how several factors have changed the scenario. First and foremost, social media has made things accessible, which includes the choice of products and brands. For consumers in the current times, especially in a country like India, a product launch or a brand can create a splash even in the remotest locations, as long as there is access to data connectivity.

So, access around information has increased immensely. Overall, social media has democratised communication. In tier-2 or tier-3 cities, till about recent years, people were exposed to just a handful of brands or

a limited communication about a product line was available to them in their respective local markets. With the advent of social media, this has changed completely, and in a democratic manner. With a dedicated presence on several social media platforms, a brand needs to create regular and relevant content, along with frequent interactions with its consumers or 'followers'.

A tier-2 consumer might check out a new product on the Instagram handle of a celebrity or an influencer and seek that product in his local market. These omni channels not only provide information about an offering, but also present options to buy or return a product.

● Connecting with the Consumer

From a brand perspective, connecting with the consumer and staying relevant to them is a constantly evolving process. Brands have only just begun to realise the value of truly staying connected with consumers and treating social media platforms and digital tools as more than just the means of promotion. Nowadays, brands interact with consumers via Instagram ads, short video capsules for other social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter etc. to personalise their engagement with them. For instance, a brand launches its latest apparel collection online and it instantly pops in a consumer's Instagram feed based on previous interfaces between the brand and the consumer.

Marketing is no longer about communicating to the mass. It has to be consumer specific – very targeted. Consumers want to feel that their engagements with a brand are personalised and directly relevant to them. Thus, for brands, it is no longer about designing

an advertisement around a product and creating one big campaign for conventional media platforms. The whole phenomenon, termed as 'mass advertising', is dying a slow, natural death. Customising a marketing strategy enables a brand to enhance its association with a consumer and can remarkably revolutionise the perception of a brand. For instance, a haircare brand launches a shampoo which can be customised based on one's hair type and needs. A consumer who buys this product feels that the brand understands his requirement well.

It is up to brands now to reap the potential benefits of personalising consumers' experiences to secure their long-term loyalty.

Another factor to keep in mind is that consumer needs are not defined by their geographical locations alone. Consumer cohorts have gained importance as set of consumers behave in a unique manner. For every brand, the consumer cohort will differ. And it is important for brands to classify their consumers into cohorts rather than demographics such as age or gender or any other traditional ways of classification.

For instance, in the past, an event like the ICC World Cup would see brands across categories go into an overdrive once in every four years. Today, brands need to have an 'always-on' communication with their consumers.

● Staying Consistent with Brand Engagement

To stay consistent in its approach vis-à-vis consumers, brand messaging must be in line with its identity, values, and strategy over time and across all channels. Often, while doing business, companies look at things within silos. They need to come up with strategies which

provide a consistent consumer experience across online, offline, social media, and retail or brick-and-mortar channels. Acknowledging that your consumers are being exposed to core messages, visual branding, and other brand elements repeatedly, and via multiple channels helps in solidifying brand recognition. So, brands should offer consumers a consistent experience across all available platforms.

Purpose-led Branding

Businesses exist to make profits for their shareholders. However, a brand today also carries responsibility, along with the power to make a difference and drive positive change. Consumers, especially the young populace, today, look at a brand and see whether they can relate to it beyond the product benefits. Many feel strongly about societal issues and environmental concerns. For instance, consumers who are concerned about climate change are more likely to buy sustainable products. So, a brand which places sustainability at the core of their business activities, is viewed positively by them.

Gender equality has been a forever burning issue in our country. Women in India are often told what is right for them and are expected to live by certain rules. We, at Puma, believe that the new-age Indian woman is setting examples by breaking stereotypes and refusing to be held hostage to rules which have been passed on to her mindlessly. Keeping in line with this theme, we created a campaign called *Propah Lady*, in October 2019, with an aim to provide a relevant platform to Indian women to express themselves, free from the barriers of stereotypes. The idea was not to sell our products with this campaign but to create a space

for women to relate to our brand and possibly build a community around breaking stereotypes and rigid mindsets.

Besides selling products and making profits, brands need to look at themselves and ask themselves what they really mean to their consumers. Are they able to bring out relevant issues by creating the right platforms to help engage with consumers on a higher level? In a nutshell, it is more about making a societal impact whilst building a brand.

The Final Word

Brand building strategies should be crafted with an aim to bring the consumers closer to the brand and provide value for them so that they can know, feel and experience the brand better. Consumers may have some standardised behaviour cutting across categories. Even within a specific category, a consumer might have a certain affinity or perception about a brand. For example, in the sportswear category, how a consumer cohort will perceive Puma might be different from how the same cohort views a competitive brand. A lot depends on the cohort that the brand resonates with. Thus, brands should be cognizant of their strategies, given the category they operate in and the consumers they connect with.

Key Takeaways for Brand Building:

1. Identify your consumer cohorts:
Know their pulse, understand their wants, needs and address them in your brand building strategy.

2. Be consistent:
Consumers today have several touch points to interact and engage with your brand. Be consistent in your messaging/communication across all channels--offline and online.

3. Learn to adapt and pivot:
With changing consumer needs and buying patterns, brands need to adapt quickly so as to stay connected with consumers across all platforms.