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## BRANDOLOGY – NEW GENERATION OF MARKET(ING) KNOWLEDGE

**ABSTRACT:** The paper argues for the need, at least theoretical, of “brandology” as detached knowledge in the marketing field. The idea is based on the observations and research in brand management practice in recent years which have demonstrated the increasing social life of brands, especially those with high level of brand equity. What is knowledge as a whole, scientific method and discipline is discussed, in the first place, and what are the advantages of brand knowledge, in the second. Together with distinguishing marketing and branding, semiotics is introduced as powerful enough tool in branding and brand equity’s examination and explanation. The “angel share” is an analogy suggested for better understanding the brand as social phenomenon. Finally, some suggestions are made for further development on how this “discipline” ought to be taught before the students, in order to create better understanding about the brand “nature”, and which looks at culture, marketing communications as well as social and consuming practices from different perspective. It needs intensive project-based and on-field research educational approach, counting on social and cultural studies more than on the conventional business, profit-based thinking.

**Key words:** brand, knowledge, socio-culture, applied semiotics, project-based education.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The brand discourse exceeded the corporations' boardrooms and business schools auditoria about late 80's or early 90's and entered the agenda of sociology, anthropology, linguistics and media studies. This fact demonstrates two fundamental issues – first, brands are not discussion topic only for marketers any more, since obviously it is rather a **socio-cultural phenomenon** than strictly commercial one, and, second, at the same time marketers and the new generation of managers should be ten times more careful for and much more prepared dealing with the brand matter than they have been ever before.

What is more, this paper claims that brand as a communication format and branding as real business activities are quite important for achieving success in contemporary complicated business conditions, dominated by globalization, intensified communications and strong consumer influence (Arvidsson 2006). Also, since brand is a core of greatly interdisciplinary realm there is a real need for science dedicated exclusively to it which we could simply named “*brandology*”. This is neither newly born buzz nor yet convenient academic mix of management, modern social media theories and applied semiotics. Rather it is something more and different. Thus, despite of its a little bit pretentious “-ology” ending, such a science or at least ‘discipline’ deserves more attention because it offers different knowledge beyond the sum of the well-known marketing and communication theories that have been involved in the topic so far. So, above all I'd like to avoid any misapprehensions since my goal is not to invent another “fancy” word including with “-ology”. My only claim is that as a discipline “brandology” has already existed no matter what name or tag we are trying to put on it and the paper is dedicated to short - and hopefully convincing - argumentation in this direction. In last 20-30 years market researchers, marketers and scholars in various areas have been approaching the topic step by step and from different perspectives and have been arriving to some crucial common conclusions about a brand. For instance, it is a phenomenon with commercial roots but with social crown - with all positive and negative effects which it has brought (Klein 2000, Chevalier and Mazzalovo 2004, Lury 2004, Arvidsson 2006, Manning 2010).

## 2 “BRAND” AND “BRANDING”.

This paper was inspired by the experience I have had so far in teaching and researching different topics in the realm of brand and branding in the light of marketing management,

communication and social studies and last but not last - semiotics. As a lecturer I have asked myself a couple of times which element of the marketing mix actually brand has arisen from? I have had no plain answer to that question yet and I suppose that no one has succeeded to respond accurately where is the origin of the brand in terms of the well-known mix, but only more P's have to be included in the equation in search for a reasonable explanation.

Where actually brand came from? Classical marketing theory can't answer this question easily. Historically brand is highly bonded up with Product since, first and foremost, a brand should stand **on** something and, secondly, **for** something. Properly speaking, communication in the broad sense (i.e. not only in terms of Promotion, but Placement, which organizes points-of-contact, and Price, which most often is a tool for quality indication) is what fills up the simple "name" with associations, motivation, images, and eventually added value. Hence, brands speak to us and we speak to and through them in an endless and intensive process. Consumer culture, in fact, supported by global media and growing trade connections worldwide, provided the infrastructure needed for the "brandelution" that burst approximately in late 80's.

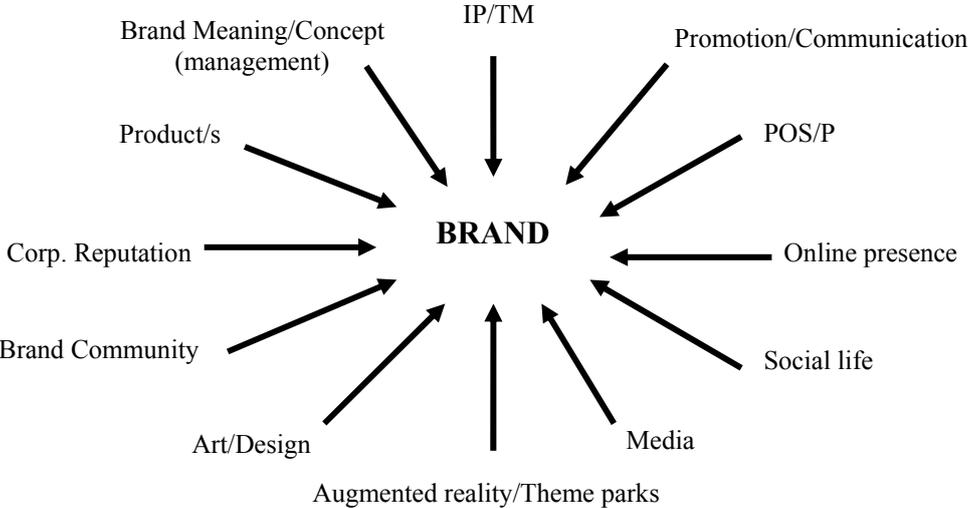


Fig.1 – Brand Points-of-Performance both virtual and physical (Author: D.T.)

The definition of "brand" and "branding" made by the reputable American Marketing Association is: "A brand is a customer experience represented by a collection of images and ideas; often, it refers to a symbol such as a name, logo, slogan, and design scheme. Brand recognition and other reactions are created by the accumulation of experiences with the specific product or service, both directly relating to its use, and through the influence of advertising,

design, and media commentary." (AMA 2014). Hence, the contemporary notion encompasses brand as a concept, the aggregation of virtual and real contact with it, and the crucial role of media (fig. 1). But put in semiotic terms, we are talking about a collection or combination of signs and intensive symbolic exchange (Mick 1986) that presents brand in several dimensions as follows:

- Business format (managerial strategic approach to the segment/s and competition).
- Product (attributes, benefits, innovations).
- Medium (something to speak for, company's communication platform).
- Cultural leader (communities, symbolicity, rituals, values).
- Social mediator (identification, events, interpersonal messages).
- Experience provider (as usually including all the dimensions just listed).

From top to bottom consumers have at their disposal more and more ways to "meet" brands and to decide their fates by participation both in their production process and social life. The more communication means the more consumption of signs, images, myths, lifestyles, etc. (see fig.1 and 2).

### **3 BRAND KNOWLEDGE IS ON THE STAGE.**

Let us continue with what is available in the students' most favourite source of knowledge and wisdom – Wikipedia. It says that "science" (Latin: "scientia") literally means "knowledge" and it is a systematic enterprise that builds and organizes knowledge in the form of testable explanations and predictions about the universe. In an older and closely related meaning, "science" also refers to a body of knowledge itself, of the type that can be rationally explained and reliably applied (Wiki 2014b; see also Polanyi 1946). A "discipline" (or specialism), on its turn, is knowledge or a concentration in one academic field of study or profession. A discipline incorporates expertise, people, projects, communities, challenges, studies, inquiry, and research areas that are strongly associated with academic areas of study or areas of professional practice. An academic discipline, or field of study, is a branch of knowledge that is taught and researched at the college or university level. They tend to co-evolve with systems of professions. These may be said to have the knowledge and the privilege of authorizing new learnings in particular disciplinary areas. For example, the branches of science are commonly referred to as the scientific disciplines (Wiki 2014a).

The scientific method yet is a body of techniques for investigating phenomena, acquiring new knowledge, or correcting and integrating previous knowledge. To be termed “scientific”, a method of inquiry must be based on empirical and measurable evidence subject to specific principles of reasoning (Wiki 2014d).

Kevin Keller’s explanation provides important but from the inside outwards point of view: “From the perspective of the CBBE model, brand knowledge is the key to creating brand equity, because it creates the differential effect that drives brand equity. What marketers need, then, is an insightful way to represent how brand knowledge exists in consumer memory” (Keller *et al.* 2012: 58). Just like it, brand equity is the mystic result of active, consistent and marketing efforts which every quarter or just a year (Aaker 1991 and 1996, Keller *et al.* 2012). Each management should invest some tangible capital in order to receive intangible power in the consumers mind as high level of awareness, preference and commitment. Thus, “equity” turns to be the share of market, mind and wallet which the consumer gives to particular brand but, paradoxically enough, just to take his/her share from it. In this case it is not strange that managers can’t sleep realizing that they don’t really own their brands (Bullmore 2001).

In the first place, manager has to have knowledge on brand on his/her part, in order to be able to create brand equity (as a knowledge for given brand) as a specific relation with consumers. Prof. Keller’s definition and bulk of examples he gives are highly useful to understand how brand equity (i.e. inimitable value of particular brand) could work successfully, considering consumer’s psychological and economical characteristics, but not what is it “by nature”. The management perspective is at least as much important as the consumer’s one, thus, the statement is that semiotics was the key that opened the gates for new knowledge on brand and branding. The real power of science is in examining the objects and phenomena in various points of view and to fix objective laws. Semiotics is known with its focus on sign systems, their social use and life (precisely) as well as on knowledge creation and sharing. Since it maintains that we are not able to know our world without signs mediation, consequently, it is natural semiotics to be powerful and useful enough tool helping managers to understand and control their brand in better way (Mick 1986).

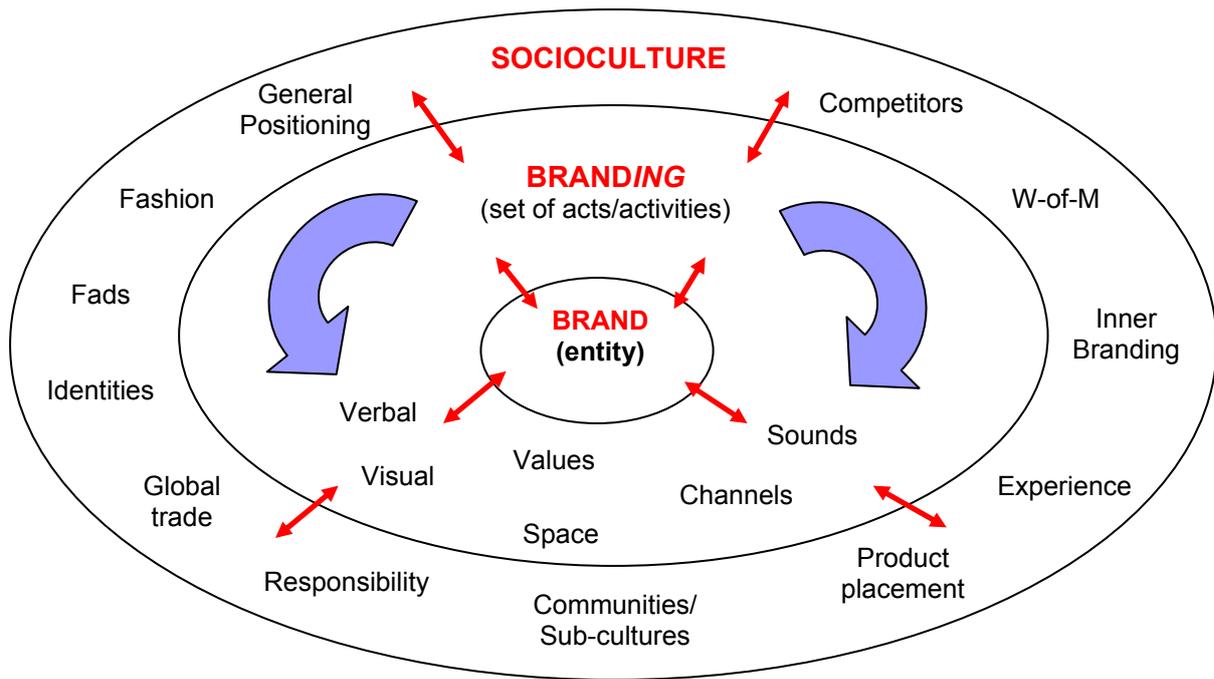


Fig.2 – “Meaning” should be considered as “producing/perceived coordinated-meaning”, i.e. meaning as “process”, since it is not fixed and needs context and interpretation in action. The diagram maps the levels of brand meaning generation in current business and communication environment (Author – D.T).

Brand meaning definitely means “Consumer Based Brand Equity” (Keller *et al.* 2012). Everything **valuable** in life and in market is **meaningful** in one way or another, personally or socially, and this principle is in force especially for consumer-oriented brands, no matter in which sector (FMCG, luxury, sports goods etc.) they usually operate (see Mick and Oswald 2006, Batey 2008). Nigel Piercy calls our attention to the important insight that in contemporary markets traditional brand-based marketing that has been stressing the image but not the value for its consumers, actually, has been losing the loyalty of the upcoming wave of more sophisticated consumers who look for constant improvement in the things that matter for them (2009: 110 ff).

Meaning gives one stable reason to consumer to buy many times, to prefer given brand, to have positive attitude, to seek and to share information and his/her interest/s with other consumers (fig. 2). As Mark Batey puts it in his very prominent work, meaning “refers to the semantic and symbolic features of the brand, the sum of the fundamental conscious and unconscious elements that compose the consumer’s mental representation of the brand” (2008: 111 ff). In other words, brand is multidimensional entity (again) since it embraces public and personal, rational and emotional, prominent and hidden layers but somehow consistent. Just like our brain which reflects and tidy up the experience we have every day.

#### 4 WHAT BRAND SEMIOTICS ACTUALLY STUDIES?

Russian semiotician Yuri Lotman wrote that analogy is far from being just a figure of speech but a useful scientific method which allows us to draw out the deepest specificities and characteristics of the object under study (usually by making appropriate parallels). This tool allows us to use the familiar notion or notions to construct newly born and/or unfamiliar objects or phenomena which probably could not be cognoscible by any other way. Analogy, therefore, is a highly semiotic process presupposing serious cognitive responsibility. So, what analogy could we apply for describing and underlining “brand equity” features in terms of brand semiotics? If we imagine the market as a cellar full with brands put in barrels, then, brand semiotics studies the “angel’s share”. This describes the phenomenon of waste of about 2% of alcohol because of the evaporation process during the maturation period, which wine and whiskey industries experience every year. But this process also makes them of high quality, if only it does not turn them into vinegar, instead.

In this perspective brand equity is neither a company’s property nor shareholders’, but stakeholders’. But don’t get this wrong though! In fact, there are no “angels” in the market and semiotics deals with real people but they are true angels that make our brand/s strong and resisting against the competition despite of all their whims and continuously changing moods. The “spirit” our brand/s lose/s from its/their products year after year transforms itself into spirit (“human” as Kotler *et al.* put it, 2010), displaying itself in a form of loyalty and commitment that constructs meaningful/long-lasting brand/s.

Could be helpful with respect both with every single element or act of brand/ing and with the whole entity (i.e. single sign and entire sign system of a given brand) (fig. 2). Nowadays a brand is loaded with more symbols – social, cultural and personal, it is the new dominant entity in supply side since in most cases it is the only bearer of added value promises and messages for shared values (Mick and Oswald 2006). That’s why it is not accidental that brand’s special feature of bearing information makes it central object of semiotic analysis. In her efforts to explain such a market and social phenomena, Marcela Cimatti points out that brand is “a transport vehicle by which product – and the aspects it embraces – takes a dynamic and emotional place in the everyday life of the mass consumption in the context of his/her system of socio-cultural values” (2006: 3). In her opinion, the meaning a brand has in the consumer’s mind is its image that is a mental picture of multitude impressions, a complex notion which

includes certain myths (semi-truths that highly stimulate communication with given brand), fictions (an elaboration of the image by means of made-up fact and stories) and dreams (personal desires and quests that lead consumer in its behavior).

The multisided substance of brand as a sign system, build by many other existing sign systems available for consumers, presupposes that it could be examine in various levels and from different perspectives. As reputable authors in brand semiotics like Laura Oswald and Giampaolo Fabris assert, various interdependent structures provide a basis of the brand discourse (Oswald 2012: 50-51; Fabris and Minestrone 2004: 135). These structures even form a certain hierarchy because sense perception of a given brand presupposes **material** dimension availability either only in form of signs composing the brand visual identity (logo, type, colors, distinctive package and other elements) or in other kinds of artifacts as advertisements, images, styles, shapes, etc. Further, there is **convention**, i.e. the code system which represents the established socio-cultural rules, norms and traditions, by which brand meaning could be comprehended, shared and distributed among consumers. Hence, in terms of research, a brand is a subject of semiotic deconstruction. In other words, semiotic could be seen as meta-language (description/deconstruction) of brand and branding activities which goes beyond the usual market/ing discourse.

## **5 BRAND KNOWLEDGE IN EDUCATION PRACTICE.**

Part of the argumentation here is in making some suggestions. Therefore, I'll be trying to put brandology, semiotics included, in the today's education agenda. Bearing in mind all what has been said so far, new look on the topic and new approach in teaching in branding and brand management should be adopt, no matter if we consider higher education or companies' inner training, which in most of the Western economies has already been in practice to a certain extend. Branding, in the first place, should be considered as another/next/new level of doing marketing at least because of the era of the consumer dominance, quest for authenticity, shorter product life cycle and power of the social media (Kotler *et al.* 2010; Keller *et al.* 2012; Piercy 2009). Product itself is just a platform for starting relationship between producer and consumer, image exceeds function, traditional advertising is not as powerful as it was, brand communities are reality, experience is a base of the developed economies but not only a tool in marketing, and so on and so forth. All these make classical business and marketing education to look out of date (even though still unavoidable, I'm sure about that) but in order to make the next step

the education system needs wider, interdisciplinary approach leading student in the heterogeneous and complex sources of human-based and culturally determined brand equity (Batey 2008; Keller *et al.* 2012).

More knowledge in humanities, cultural and social sciences should be put in management courses' curricula to enrich and widen the market picture in branding. Moreover, a lot of people overlook the fact that, by its very essence, markets are culturally constructed and marketing is not a mathematical but social discipline, dealing with resources/products allocation (put simply). Also, case studies, especially cross-cultural and consumer behaviour, could make the matter more clear and human-oriented than tables and figures actually do.

## **6 CONCLUSION.**

The inspiration behind this paper is my practice in last 5-6 years teaching brand management as well as researching opportunities that semiotics has been giving and possibly would give to the marketers and market researchers. But as it appears, semiotics is still far from the boardrooms and managers mindset. This situation could be corrected by introducing it more persistently into the business and marketing education curriculum. Contemporary students in the disciplines in question and a lot of actual managers are in fact maimed because of the lack of knowledge in social science and humanities. However, brands should be brought back to the people who eventually put meaning in them and in such a way they make brands valuable and successful. Having in mind that brand is a non-material, socio-culture entity which lives because of creating and sharing meaning among the consumers, we could easily point out the need of detached knowledge on brand, on the one hand, and the role of semiotics in it, on the other (Mick 1986, Mick and Oswald 2006, Piercy 2009: 83). Brand knowledge itself covers all the requirements put in the notion of "knowledge", since it offers new knowledge and integrates (and corrects) the previous one, gives different perspectives for market researcher as well as new/fresh explanations and predictions, it represents and connects particular academic and professional field (brand building and management), and, finally, provides for a wider audience theoretical and practical understanding of a given subject. In this context we should remind that in conjunction with semiotics brand knowledge discusses and addresses the future more than the present (trends observation, meaning management, ads pre-testing, etc.).

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