

STRENGTHENING BRAND PRESENCE AND CREATING BRAND RELATIONSHIPS IN THE SOCIETY THROUGH INTEGRATED MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS

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***Abstract:** Throughout the history, rituals and traditions have been important factors strengthening the relationships of people in the society. As marketing is one of the social processes involving exchanging something of value for the members in the society, brands can function like a ritual or tradition that connects members in the society. This paper proposes the roles of brands as one of the integral components in the culture and investigates the processes of the society to incorporate brands as part of the culture through integrated marketing communications. In so doing, brands increase the presence in the society and connect the members of the society. Implications of brands as a part of cultural events, rituals and traditions will be analyzed in light of a growing popularity of corporate social responsibility. Relationships of brands with individuals in the society will also be studied to understand more about its roles in the social activities especially in the era of social media.*

***Key Words:** brands, relationships, society, integrated marketing communications*

***JEL classification codes:** M1, M3*

I. INTRODUCTION

Marketers have long been creating linkages between their businesses with the society. The companies along with their products and brands have become important components for the lives of peoples in the community, and the people in the community are generally proud of the company, its products and its brands. As companies engage more in corporate social responsibility activities, they strengthen their presence and relationships with the society, aiming more at enhancing the quality of life of the people in the society instead of merely satisfying their customers' needs.

Since the ancient times, we have witnessed the linkages of certain products as parts of a tradition in the society. This includes chocolate bunny for Easter, pumpkin for Halloween, eggnog for Christmas in the United States, beer for Oktoberfest in

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Germany, mooncakes for mid-autumn festivals in China, etc. Some products have become a standard norm for the activities like popcorn for movies.

The linkages of products with the society have been a tradition with tales that people in the society are familiar with. This has sparked our interest to investigate the relationships of brands to the people in the society as brands are more specific than products and they are more difficult to blend in as a requirement to create relationships with people in the society.

This study will first analyze the differences between products and brands in the tradition to give us some insights on the roles they have in the society as products can involve in the tradition of the society much better than brands can. Then, we will explore the factors creating brand relationships in the society through evidences of brands in the social events. These events represent the specific societies where brands actively involve with their target audiences.

II. PRODUCTS AND BRANDS IN THE SOCIETY

As witnessed in several cultures, products have been incorporated into the tradition and rituals of the society for many centuries. This trend also happens nowadays mostly with popular culture including music festivals, cultural events, exhibitions, sports, etc. However, products and brands are different in many aspects.

- A. The functional aspects of products in the tradition. The ancient tradition initiated the functional needs for the society to require products as part of the tradition. Foods and drinks are mostly the fundamental requirements. Normally, the products required to be used in the event must be easily found or abundant during the time of the festivals such as beer made from wheat or malt harvested during autumn for Oktoberfest and pumpkin for Halloween. Nevertheless, the ancient tradition does not require any brand as part of the tradition. For instance, the society has never required a particular brand of mooncakes to be used during the mid-autumn festival in China nor does it specify certain brands of beer in Oktoberfest. There are possibly many explanations for these. First, the tradition involves a large group of mass consumers in the society which have different tastes and styles. The requirement of products alone has been specific enough for a large group of mass consumers. Second, the requirement of brands would be considered benefits to certain companies or some smaller groups of people in the society and there are definitely some resistances to the idea.
- B. Direct participation of products and indirect participations of brands. To be able to create a tradition in a society, a large number of participants must be involved. In the Thanksgiving parades, several companies and brands join to create the event and make it enjoyable to the general consumers. Therefore, the common product allows more participants to take part in the tradition, broadening the participants which include companies and brands, expanding

the number of potential customers and, in many cases, opening an opportunity for new product development as we have seen in Easter's and Valentine's chocolate, Christmas decorations, etc.

- C. The purposes of the products in the tradition. It is certainly obvious that the tradition's purposes are far more significant than the product's purposes. Generally, the tradition's main purpose in many societies is to have fun and to enjoy a good moment together. We have observed the common timing for the festivals as the beginning of spring and of winter is the time to celebrate. To celebrate the start of spring, Chinese New Year and Cherry blossom festivals in Japan are the tradition marking the new beginning. In the agricultural societies, the time after harvesting is the time to celebrate before winter starts such as the Oktoberfest, the Halloween and the mid-autumn festivals in China.

During the joyful festivals, the tradition does not require the people to seek for specific brands and it would be troublesome to do so. Instead, the tradition was created so the society can eliminate excess supply of products during that time period, such as pumpkins or malt after harvest.

Products are only part of the fun during the festivals. Brands have even less significant value as brands change and seldom meet the various tastes of people in the society.

III. THE ROLES OF BRANDS IN THE SOCIETY: EVIDENCES FROM EVENT SPONSORSHIPS

This study intends to develop a conceptual framework to understand the processes to create brand relationships in the society. As the society and culture are broad units of analysis, this study will focus on the smaller social events that brands have sponsored and initiated relationships with people in those societies. Events can be the society's tool to generate social cohesion (Richards, De Britto & Wilks, 2013). Luo (2010) mentioned that the closing ceremony of the Beijing Olympics was intended to be public rituals presenting the reinvention of China as a nation. Thus, events are generally spectacular, vivid and colorful. They attract people and media to join and share the moments. The story telling and expression of an event are special and unique that connect people of the particular society together and they also show the difference of their community from others' (Ziakas, 2013). Even though it might be difficult, a brand can relate itself to the event as the event is unique and has its own sets of audiences with social cohesions among the participants of the event forming their own society.

Brands that continuously participate in the events include Macy's Thanksgiving day parade for 89 years in 2015, Olympics-sponsored Lenovo, Virgin V Festival, Tennants T in the Park, etc. These brands have sponsored the cultural events which are music, arts, sports, etc. and have become related to the events and they are identified clearly by the participants of the events. Therefore, event sponsorships by brands

serve as a unit of analysis in this study so we can understand the processes a brand has created relationships with the target audience of an event which can represent a small society by itself.

IV. A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF THE PROCESSES TO CREATE BRAND RELATIONSHIPS IN THE SOCIETY BRAND & SOCIETY ENGAGEMENT

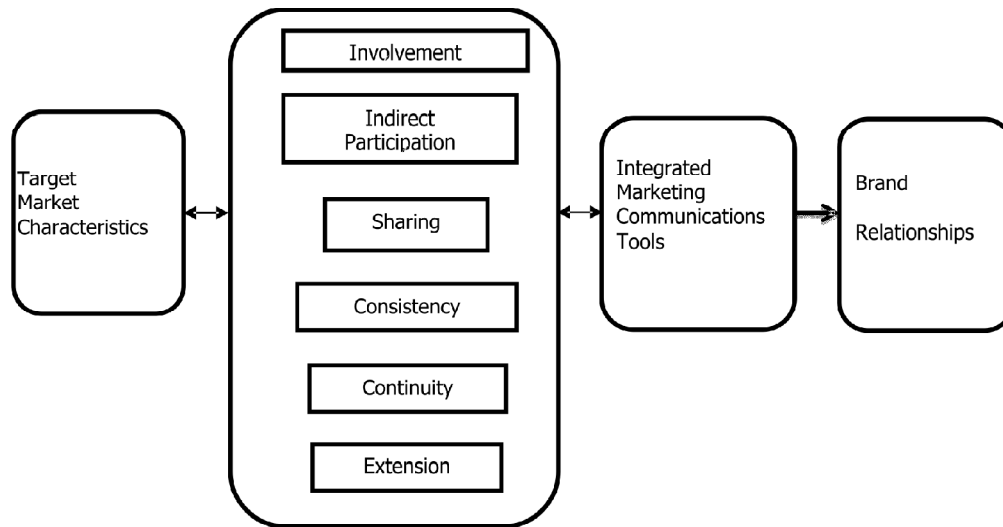


Figure 1: A conceptual framework of the processes to create brand relationships in the society

A brand can involve in the events of the society where the members participate and have a chance to create a relationship with it. The relationships link the brand, the event and its members. We will first investigate the factors depicting in Figure 1 and then explain the relationships of these factors thereafter.

- A. Target audience. As in any good integrated marketing communication programs, target audience should be the priority concern. Therefore, we will first analyze the specific characteristics of the target audience of an event.
1. Emotional purposes. The target audience's primary purpose for any social and cultural events is fun and enjoyment (Newey, 2013). Collins (2004) stated that people attending rites or events only concern about their good feeling and emotion. Therefore, it is not a good idea for the brands to directly present any functional side of their products or services. Brands should instead focus on the activities or experiences that create good mood and entertainment (Newey, 2013).
 2. Demanding. As the target audience has some purposes in their mind, they are likely to act toward the purposes. Thus, brand managers must be very careful

to understand this important purpose of the target audience as the target audience is likely to behave at their own leisure during their relaxing time and they are likely to be more demanding. Brand manager should understand this psychological state of their target audience and provide what can bring comfort and convenience to them or try to solve their problems during the event.

3. Different mindsets from the sponsors. While the needs for marketers are to promote their brands, the target audience in the events generally has totally different mindsets from the marketers, since the target audience is in the events or festivals for the purposes of entertainment. It is almost impossible for the sponsors to insert any idea directly about their products or services. The target audience can reject those ideas instantaneously (Newey, 2013). Brands generally provide comfort for the event's participants and they are expected to be in the mind of the customers through activities that are not directly related to the brand.

B. Brand and Society Engagement

To link the brand with the society, marketing managers need to consider the following factors when they introduce the brand to the members of the society.

1. Involvement. Involvement is a significant factor linking the brand with the activities in the society. Marketers must see the association of the brand with the life of people in the society. This includes the events that happen in daily life and they must be able to link them to the core elements or the positioning of the brands. There are always events, rituals, activities, in a society and the brand must be able to involve in those events, rituals or activities. In general, brands must sponsor the events, rituals or activities on a continuous basis just like Macy's involvement in Thanksgiving day's parades. If the brands are related to the events, it is much better to see the linkages in the eyes of the consumers repeatedly. However, some brands decided to involve in certain activities which are not related to the products and they can successfully achieve the results as the target audience can identify the brands that have sponsored the events e.g. Lenovo with the Olympics, etc. In Thailand, Antacin, an antacid medicine, has continuously sponsored the Thai boxing show on Sunday afternoon for decades. It provides a money reward for the boxer who can knock out their rival. The brand has been known among people who like Thai Boxing and the public who watches the show on television. Repetition helps enhance the memory and contributions of the brands.
2. Indirect participation. Marketers realize that the society does not require any brand to be part of it. Thus, brands must not force the relationships to happen. For instance, VISA had sponsored the Olympics and forced the participants to accept only the VISA card for the event. This has created an uneasy feeling for

the ticket buyers as the action signified insincerity (Newey, 2013). On the other hand, Reebok offered lean protein bacon at the CrossFit event instead of promoting its athletic shoes and apparel was seen as a good example for sincere involvement in the event. (McNeal, 2014) as Reebok did not talk about shoes. Instead, it had the good intention to promote good health for the participants of the event.

3. **Sharing.** When there is a relationship between brands and the society, brands share their feeling and experience with members of the society as well. In this aspect, several brands have expressed sympathy with the members of the society when catastrophes, e.g. floods, earthquakes, volcano eruption, epidemics, etc., strike. Brands share their pain and try to help them. Brands also share the joyful moments with the society e.g. to celebrate when the home team wins the games, to commemorate the anniversary of the head of states, to participate in the city or state fairs, etc. Brands can involve their employees, suppliers, customers, neighboring community, etc. in these occasions. Direct involvement such as monetary donation may not be so effective in such instances. However, the company should try to find ways to engage in some sharable experiences and make them worth sharing with other people when the sharing tools, e.g. the social media, are prevalent these days.
4. **Consistency.** As an important element in integrated marketing communications, brands can create relationships in the society through consistent engagement in the events, rituals or activities of the society. Consistency helps people recognize the messages and the brands more clearly through the repetition of a series of messages and actions for the society.
5. **Continuity.** Companies and brands should engage in the events, rituals or activities with continuity. Years and years of continuous support allow members to see the dedication of the brands. Generally, it is often difficult for the brands to do so as the social events, rituals or activities do not come so often. Some events are annually. The Olympics come in every four years and it is hard for the audience to remember who participate in the event. Thus, marketers can choose more than one of the same events to repeat the efforts, such as the Olympics, the FIFA World Cups, the Asian Games, etc.
6. **Extension.** As a result of the short and indirect involvement of the brands in the activities, it is necessary for the marketers to find ways to extend their relationships with the members of the society through different communications tools. Marketers often use sales promotion tools such as sweepstakes or contests to extend the relationships with the audience of the activities. Databases of contacts such as emails, name and addresses of the participants can be useful for future contacts. The extension may start from the indirect ones and move on to the direct ones in the long run. Certainly, the participants of Reebok's lean protein bacon fully understood who sponsored

the promotion of lean protein bacon. More information about the bacon can be found more in Reebok's website whereby participants can indirectly expose to the Reebok's brands but not necessary the products (McNeal, 2014).

C. Integrated Marketing Communications Tools to Promote Brand Relationships with the Society

Even though events might be the main communication tool for the company to initiate their relationships with the target audience, other integrated marketing communications tools can be utilized to coordinate the communication efforts both before and after the events.

1. Event. There are some characteristics of the event that the brand manager must consider
 - 1.1 The relationships of the event and the target audience. It is important for the brand manager to select the event or festival that includes their target audience. Generally, the brand manager needs to consider the segmentation criteria that define their target market groups which can be demographic, geographic, psychographic, behavioral, etc. For instance, the six brands that supported the Coachella music festivals 2013 matched that target audience very well: Fruttare, Heineken, H&M, JBL, PlayStation and Red Bull (Bolz, 2013).
 - 1.2 Less Cluttered Environment. The event or festival generally limits the number of sponsors and it is less cluttered than other types of mass media, such as newspapers, magazine, television, radio, etc.

Sponsors are unique and easily identifiable by the target audience.
2. Advertising. The role of advertising seems to be diminished these days as most of the products are segmented and the audience of the mass media scattered (Hongcharu, 2013). However, advertising can function as a supporting role to generate brand awareness and knowledge so people know about the category and the brand. Therefore, events are seldom used without support from advertising as people who are familiar with the product or brand can miss the message (Amis & Cornwall, 2005). In a global or mass environment, advertising is still the cost effective tool to communicate with a large group of audience all at once. For instance, VISA has been successfully advertised it supported the Olympics through posters, billboards, television and radio ads, etc.
3. Sales Promotion. As participants of the events do not care about the products, direct sales promotion of the products or services is difficult to implement in the events even with sample distribution (Newey, 2013). Heineken provided air conditioned rooms for the participants of the Coachella music festival to stay before offering beer to them (Bolz, 2013). Reebok chose to offer healthy choices of food instead of shoes (McNeal, 2014). Brand managers can use sales promotion tools such as discounts, e-coupons, continuity programs for the participants after the event to strengthen the relationships with the target audience (Johnson, 2014).

4. **Public Relations.** Brand managers can apply a lots of PR techniques to enhance their relationships with the target audience. For instance, they must arrange a press conference to let the target audience know that they will sponsor the event before the event starts and let the participants know the activities of the brand in the event beforehand. This would increase the participation of the target audience with the activities of the brand. Moreover, they can continuously communicate with the press and the target audience after the event to let them know what the brand will do thereafter.
 5. **Social Media.** The event organizers and the brands managers should work together to encourage the target audience to disseminate the news of the events to other participants. The main purpose of the social media use is to mimic one of the most important elements in the society i.e. to spread the news. However, it is impossible for the brands to force the target audience to do it. The target audience will opt to do it by themselves if the event has something exciting and emotionally attractive for them to share with the friends and others. Some brands have decided to include their brands in the name implicitly and it can be shared and understood by other members in the society e.g. Virgin V Festival or Tennants T in the Park in the United Kingdom. Some brands like Heineken, Jagermeister's Jager Ice Truck or Southern Comfort's Juke Joints had activities related to their drinks and shareable to other members who are not around (Newey, 2013).
- D. **Brand Relationships.** After considering the factors that can link the brands, marketers should explore the environment of the events or festivals to see whether the target audience experience any troubles or difficulties. By studying these, the brand managers understand their "pain points" and they should create a program to alleviate these pain points for the target audience (Griffith & Edwards, 2010). The brand managers should keep in mind all the time that the target audience does not like the activities that involve them with the brands directly. For instance, Heineken understands the heated environment of the Coachella music festival held in the desert in Indio, California, USA so Heineken provided an air-conditioned place for the target audience to rest (Bolz, 2013).

In searching for ways to alleviate pain points, marketers are adding value for the brands to customers preferably indirectly and implicitly. For instance, Jagermeister, the alcoholic drink offered its truck bar as a platform to help the target audience see the main stage (Newey, 2013). Some brands may decide to provide wifi for the target audience during the events. The password for using the wifi can be the words related to the brand.

Figure 1 is the model depicting the processes for marketers to create a relationship of their brand with the member of the society. The model starts with the target market characteristics which should be first considered by the marketers. The target market characteristics is the primary factor the marketers

decides to plan the engagement of their brand with the society and the decisions on the details of the brand and society engagement also depends on the target audience characteristics. For instance, the decision of Red Bull to target the audience of the extreme sports events is because the brand can be well fitted to the target market of the extreme sports events. The ways the company involves in the extreme sports events, including the message design, media exposure, message continuity and consistency, etc, are also based on the target market characteristics.

The brand and society engagement then helps marketing managers designs the appropriate messages which can be fitted with the appropriate integrated marketing communications tools. By choosing the right integrated marketing communications tools, marketers enhance the brand and society engagement. Then, the integrated marketing communications tools can help the brand create a relationship with the members of the society.

V. DISCUSSION

From the evidences of social, cultural events and festivals, it is clearly witnessed that it is difficult for a brand to become a compulsory element of an event. However, it is not difficult for the marketers to initiate a relationship between the brand and the target audience of the event or strengthen the brand presence in the event. The followings are some of the insights which strengthen our understanding on this matter.

- A. Socialization of the brand. A brand can function like human being and it has its own personality. When the brand is accepted as a member of the society, it socializes, communicates and connects with other members in that society. In the environment of an event, brands stand out clearly as there is less clutter in the event than in the mass media. Thus, they are easily visible to the target audience. Even though people might not talk about it and we have no means to force the target audience to talk about it, they are aware of the brand's presence and the relationship between the brand and the target audience is established. When the brand has established the relationships with the target audience, it is the responsibility of the brand manager to sustain and strengthen the relationship so it will last as long as possible. This can be done through integrated marketing communication programs or continue to sponsor the event in the future in a consistent manner.
- B. Emotional and indirect relationships of the brand. In the old days, when a brand sponsored an event, it generally related its functional value to the event. For instance, watches sponsored the sports events e.g. the Olympic Game, the FIFA world cup, the Asian Games, etc. They became the official timekeeper of the events. The functional value of the watch is only on the superficial level since consumers know that the brands are benefiting from the events and their attitude toward the brands can be negative (Cornwell 2014). Moreover, the sponsorship

might be seen as the selfish act of the sponsor to take the opportunity to present the brand. Therefore, it is unlikely for the target audience to talk to other members in the society about the brand as there is nothing impressive and special to talk about. On the other hand, many brands nowadays try to offer an indirect way to reach the target audience by helping to ease the pain points in the events and solve the target audience's problems e.g. offering wifi signals, distributing cold towels, providing an air-conditioned room in the dessert, etc. In 2012, Barclay Bank in the United Kingdom introduced Barclay PayBand so the event attendees could pay for everything in the Wireless Festival without using cash (Lowe, 2012). By reducing the pain points, brands create impressive feelings and the members are likely to share their experiences with the friends. Moreover, instead of solving the pain points of the events, some brands may decide to enhance the joy and happiness the target audience has in their events and this also is worth sharing.

On the company side, it is very difficult to justify an integrated marketing communication budget plan for supporting any action without clear involvement of the brand. Brand managers must understand this aspect of the long term emotional and indirect investment for the brand if they hope that their brand would build a relationship with the members of the society.

- C. Integration of integrated marketing communications (IMC) tools. Any successful integrated marketing communication program requires a solid integration of all the communication tools. Brand managers generally manage the integration through the consistency of messages to link all the tools together to deliver the messages to the target audience. In the era of social media, successful integration of IMC tools will increase word of mouth communication as we would like the target audience to bring our messages to their friends as they can do it faster and more reliable (Bayus, 1985). At the same time, this would save the company's communication budget. It should be noted that the IMC tools that should be used are public relations, social media and sales promotion as they can create a "soft sell" campaign that will link the brand to the target audience effectively. The brand manager may start with public relations with the press or stakeholders and invites the target audience through social media, at the same time, the brand manager has the database of the target audience. In the event, the brand solves the target audience's pain points and becomes an emotional supporter so the target audience feels good. Then, after the event, the brand manager can launch the sales promotion program to support the dissemination of the good feeling the target audience has with other members through social media. Even though the IMC plan does not involve the brand directly, all the communication mix elements can function to remind the target audience about the brands and let them take action to search for more information or to tell about the brand or the event with others.
- D. Long term commitment for brand's presence and relationships. One of the most difficult factors for involving a brand in the society is the long term commitment

of the brand for the event. As the campaign or program is suggested to be emotional and indirect, it is essential for the brand to present itself in the event consistently and continuously. However, most brands were plagued with changes, making it difficult to maintain the styles for consistency or the length of time for continuity. These changes include the changes in the company's policy, budget and brand managers, etc. The event may also change with more participants, creating more clutter; higher costs; changes in the format and style, etc. All these hurdles are challenges facing the brand managers who have participated in the events. Brand managers should keep in mind that the events are a society. They do evolve, so does the target audience. Therefore, it is common that the brand must evolve and adjust itself along with all these changes in the society. Some brands have been doing it very well like Heineken with 12 or more years in the Coachella Music Festivals, Red Bull in all the extreme sports, etc. Long term commitment is necessary to bring the brand to the attention of the society and increase its presence along with the relationships the target audience has with the brand.

VI. CONCLUSION

A brand can become a part of the society even though it is not a large scale one as the target market of the brand differs. As it creates a relationship in the society, it is noticeable and communicable. It encourages people in the society to talk about it and the message can be designed to be a good one. Brand managers can adapt the messages as the brand adapts itself in the changing society and it may not necessarily involve with the brand. Currently, several brands do not just only solve the pain points in the events, as it is short-term, they also participate in the long-term corporate social responsibility programs and try to involve the target audience in the program. For instance, Ben & Jerry Ice Cream with Philanthropy programs, Avon with breast cancer fight, etc. Brand managers can link their brand to involve in issues like these to indirectly enhance the quality of life of their target audience and of their society in the long run.

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