

DISPATCHES™

Insights On Brand Development From The Marketing Front

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WANT TO SHAPE PERCEPTIONS? PUT A LABEL ON IT!

How many times now, in the four years since the beginning of the Iraq War, have we been reminded of the power that certain, short expressions have in *positioning* the perception of what the war really is? In the early stages we heard that the war was an “act of liberation,” and even more—“democracy-building.” As things began going against us with various factions succeeding in their daily attacks, it was termed an “insurgency.” Some critics contended that it was not merely an insurgency but really more a “civil war.” And, in recent months, we have been told that the addition of new American troops to the effort is simply a “surge,” and definitely not an “escalation.” Each of these expressions might rightly be considered as a *positioning label*, crafted intentionally by those ultimately responsible for the broader positioning of the overall war. In every case—whether labeling what the particular phase is or is not--the intention is to shape perceptions in a favorable way.

Those of us in the business of positioning brands should take a lesson from all of this. We’re also involved in shaping perceptions in a favorable way--those of our brand. And one of the most effective ways we have of doing this is by crafting a Perceptual Competitive Framework. More and more we see brands—especially those in tough, competitive categories and classes—attempting to establish a differentiating Perceptual Framework...as a way to achieve (at the very least) a perceived advantage over their competition. Just within the past few weeks, *Advertising Age* ran a story about Brand Coca-Cola entitled “Look Who’s Calling Itself ‘Sparkling.’” The by-line underneath continued, “By dropping the word ‘carbonated’ from its lexicon, Coke looks to alter the perceptions of the soda market.”

Did you ever think about Coke, or Pepsi for that matter, as anything but a “carbonated soft drink?” Put another way, aren’t “sparkling beverages” supposed to be things like Perrier and Schweppes? These are obviously labels we’ve long accepted. But take a look at what the *Ad Age* article goes on to say about Coke’s intent in changing labels: “Several times during a fourth quarter earnings call, Coca-Cola’s Chairman-CEO (E. Neville Isdell) refrained from using the tired old term for the weakening category in which his company’s flagship competes. At least a dozen times during the call, the word “carbonated” was swapped with a far more friendly term, “sparkling”....The beverage giant appears to be trying to reframe the way carbonated soft drinks—maligned for empty calories and lost share to alternative drinks—are perceived by the financial community and consumers.”

What we have here is yet another example of a marketer aiming to alter perceptions of a brand (actually, in this case as the leading brand, of an entire category as well) in a favorable way. Will it work? Who can say for sure at this point? But we should at least give the marketer some credit for trying to set a new *perceptual vision* for the brand. Good Perceptual Competitive

Frameworks go well beyond being gimmicks—they are taken seriously within the company and serve as internal, strategic labels for the direction the brand intends to go. Over the years we have often cited another beverage brand within these weekly *Dispatches*, Gatorade, as a shining example of this very thing. Long before being purchased by PepsiCo, Gatorade marketers went on-record in the trade press as aiming to have the brand perceived as something more than simply a “sports beverage” or “thirst quencher.” These labels had served the brand well in their day but a new, more competitive vision was needed for the category leader. They wanted the brand to be perceived as “essential liquid athletic equipment.” And everything the brand **did**—in product line extensions and sub-branding, in packaging design, in sponsorships and promotions, and in communications—was intentionally crafted to foster this new “equipment” perception. No wonder that even the brand’s web page showcasing the product line-up sports the title, “Essential Equipment.”

But are such creatively conceived frameworks limited to beverages or even to fast-moving consumer goods? We often hear pharmaceutical marketers lamenting that “we can’t do that in our tightly regulated drug classes.” But actually, there are Rx brands doing it all the time—whether positioning the brand against doctors or against the patient. All GP’s and Gastro-specialists know that the Prevacid, Nexium, and Aciphex brands are proton-pump inhibitors that relieve GERD (gastro-intestinal reflux disease). But each of these brands is not *perceived* the same way by physicians: Nexium, for example, is seen more as the “Healer” because the brand’s marketers have relentlessly pushed the product’s clinical effect in healing esophageal damage. Among migraine drugs, Imitrex is perceived as the “Targeted Reliever” among both doctors and patients. And Cialis is not just another ED drug—it’s “The Weekender.” These labels are alive and well in the drug marketplace, and they serve to provide a differentiating, more favorable perception of each brand versus its competition.

We think every brand can benefit from a well-crafted Perceptual Competitive Framework that is ultimately captured in one of these kinds of labels. And a good place for any brand to start in crafting such a label is with the real or perceived benefits (or sometimes even features) the brand offers. The way Virgin Atlantic Airlines built its perception as “Travel Entertainment” was largely through the features it offered passengers that British Airways didn’t (like Upper Class, door-to-door limo service, and in-flight massages). If your brand does not currently have a differentiating Perceptual Framework, your competitors have just found another way to “out-class” you.

BOATS & HELICOPTERS:

One of the ways we like to think about Perceptual Competitive Framework is to imagine presenting our brand as a new product within an existing category. Say, for instance, we are the Duracell Brand bringing a new/better performing energy source to the trade. You can imagine a customer asking something like, “So, what have you got? Another battery?” Our response would automatically be, “No. It’s not just a battery, it’s a _____.” What we fill in the blank with becomes our differentiating label.

For this week’s B&H, we offer some examples of brands that have done a pretty fair job of filling in that blank:

BRAND	“IT’S NOT JUST A”	“IT’S (A)”
Crest	power toothbrush	Oral Cosmetics
Zocor	statin	Mortality Reducer
Olay	moisturizing/ cleansing towelette	Daily Facial
Volvo	automobile	Safe Family Transport
Virgin Atlantic	airline	Travel Entertainment
BP Med Systems	cardial data collection	1 st Cardial GPS
Just for Men	hair color	The Rejuvenator
McDonald’s	fast-food outlet	Family Fun Destination
Gatorade	thirst-quencher	Liquid Athletic Equipment
Snickers	chocolate bar	Hunger Satisfier

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*Our next Open Brand Positioning & Marketing Communications
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