

Brand ID

You Have One, Whether
You Like It Or Hate It

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Foreword By Florence KHA

Back in 2005, when I launched my market research online services, was when I first met a brand consultant. He shared his knowledge about branding and even handed over to me a pile of his prized notes on branding strategies.

Unfortunately, that pile of notes remained a pile of notes on my shelf until today. And I realised branding is not something that I can just read up. Nor apply the strategies to my business operations and expect wonders to happen within months.

Fourteen years on... I met another brand consultant. This time, he got my attention. His concept of building brand identity through an online lifestyle journal was the deal sealer. Thus the creation of Espoletta: where storytellers curate stories about services and/or products for consumers. Unadulterated, unbiased and unapologetic.

I must say that I owe it to Wei Ming, for sharing his decades of branding technical know-how unreservedly through Espoletta. Not only did I benefit as his co-founder and business partner, but also our hordes of writers, merchants and benefactors who are on this branding journey with us.

What's better than putting all his knowledge in print? I hope you'll find this Brand ID book helpful.

Florence **KHA**
Editor-In-Chief, Espoletta
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Preface

Branding has always been my personal passion, having accumulated all the knowledge over the years. I shared so many things with so many people before that I had lost track of what I've actually shared. Therefore, organising all these knowledge into a book is the only logical thing to do. At least now I'll have a well-organised book that I can easily share with everybody.

This book is the second in the Espoletta series, after TEWS - The Espoletta Writing System. Though technically speaking, this was actually the first book I've ever written, many years ago. I just never got around to finishing it only. Now that TEWS is successfully published, it's about time I finish up what I had started all those years back. It's time I do justice to the topic, and get this book published.

My appreciation to Florence KHA, the Editor-In-Chief and Co-Founder of Espoletta for helping me edit this book.

Prologue

Branding has become a buzzword since the dawn of the 21st century. Anybody with an ounce of experience in design, publication or advertising, can pass themselves off as brand consultants. A rather strange phenomenon indeed. Just in the decades prior, branding is a highly specialised skill (read: expensive). Only a handful of branding professionals dare offer such services.

Many things have changed with the proliferation of Internet access. We now have easy access to freely available information on the World Wide Web. And with the free flow of knowledge, anybody can learn anything, and claim themselves to be experts in any fields.

This probably started with advertising agencies throwing in “branding services” to their clients. Since they’re already doing the design and media buying jobs, why not throw in something extra to sweeten the deal? Besides, branding and advertising are two sides of the same coin. You simply can’t have one without the other. The clients themselves wouldn’t even know the difference if you hit them in the face with it... Hmm... Sounds rather doable... But yet...

If you think about it, “bundling” extra services didn’t really start with the advertising industry. If I were to hazard a guess, I’d say that it probably started with the commercial printing industry. Especially with the smaller, family-run printing presses.

Their services are pretty straightforward: you provide them the soft copy, and they print for you the hard copy. Their charges are also straightforward too. They quote based on the number of copies ordered, and amount of coloured inks used. Of course, they sometimes also offer other printing-related services too, like die-cutting, glueing, folding, etc.

When competition starts getting stiff, they'll even throw in "extra" services, like design work. After all, the design work is intangible, hence unquantifiable. And anything that's unquantifiable doesn't carry a "cost" to them.

This brings us back to the advertising industry. "Branding" services is an unquantifiable service which they can throw in to sweeten the deal with their clients. After all, it doesn't cost them anything extra to add in the extra services. Besides, it'll be helpful to tie in together with their design work and media space arrangements too.

But this begs the question: are advertising agencies the best candidate to take on branding work? Don't forget that aside from ad agencies, there are many others who threw their hats into the branding ring too. Graphic designers, web designers, social media managers, public relations agencies, even media houses, to name a few.

How do we even decide who is best to take on our branding needs? How do we separate the chaff from the wheat? But most importantly, can we take on the responsibilities of our own branding needs?

ACT ONE

Definition Of Brand Identity

1. What Exactly Is A Brand?

The very first thing that we need to sort out is clearly defining what exactly constitutes a brand. Whether we like it or not, the terms “brand” and “branding” have become meaningless buzzwords that people throw around inconsequentially. Wanna spice up your expertise? Add the word “branding” into your CV. Wanna justify additional charges on your quotation? Create a new field and call it “branding services”. This problem is so overwhelming that the true meaning of the word “brand” is totally distorted.

1.1 Definition Of The Word “Brand”

Today, the word “brand” means many different things to many different people. To truly appreciate its meaning, we have to get to the core of the word itself. The original definition of the word “brand” is nothing more than the mark of an identity. It’s a way to separate the many different sources of a commodity.

Say you run a sundry shop, and one of the products in your vast inventory is sugar. Plain and ordinary, refined, granulated table sugar. It’s a fast moving consumable product, and you have two companies supplying them.

One day, a regular customer comes in and complains that you sold him mouldy sugar last week. Replacing the consignment to keep the customer happy isn’t an issue.

Your problem is identifying which supplier sold you the mouldy sugar, so that you can raise the issue to them. But the bigger issue is how do you tell apart which sugar came from which supplier. How does one differentiate a common commodity?

And if you happen to sell sugar from both suppliers loose from a common hopper, you're totally done for... There's no way for you to identify which sugar came from which supplier...

A potential solution to this problem is to have two different hoppers of sugar, one from each supplier. To tell them apart, you simply name them according to their supplier's identity. Of course, you also wouldn't want to reveal your suppliers' actual identities. So in place of their names, you can simply call them "A-brand" sugar and "B-brand" sugar.

By segregating the sugars at your sundry shop, you can even identify which "brand" sells out faster than the other. Perhaps there's a discernible taste difference between the two sugars? Perhaps they're not the same commodity as you thought them to be?

If you can identify the slower selling "brand", you can actually use this knowledge to your advantage. Request its supplier to reduce the wholesale price due to the perceived "quality". And in turn, you can sell it at a lower retail price in your shop too, balancing out the difference between the two "brands" of sugar.

1.2 Birth Of Branded Products

We now know that the two suppliers sell different sugars of different qualities. Hence they may want to assume control of the product branding themselves. Maybe they've decided not to sell loose bulk sugar anymore. Instead, they'll now sell you pre-packed sugars, in 200g bags each. It's now a whole lot easier to move them around, not to mention the total absence of wastage.

And they both take the responsibilities to name their own products, to differentiate it from each other. And at the same time, to differentiate themselves from the general commodity too. So instead of simply selling "sugar", you're now officially selling A-brand sugar and B-brand sugar.

It's great to be able to differentiate which sugar comes from which supplier. However, we still can't escape the fact that they're both essentially still sugar, as in the commodity. Perhaps one brand is "better" quality than the other, but that's as far as the differentiation goes.

1.3 Taking Branding To The Next Level

Market segmentation is a common way for companies to differentiate themselves from their competitors. Perhaps supplier A wants to disassociate themselves from selling plain old sugar. Perhaps they want to up their ante by offering "organic" sugar instead. Henceforth, only A-brand

sugar is “organic”, elevating themselves above their competitor’s B-brand commodity sugar. By labelling their A-brand sugar as “organic”, they can increase their price without upsetting the market’s delicate balance.

Likewise, supplier B may also want to move away from being associated with commodity sugar too. They may want to position B-brand as a “non-nutritive sweetener” instead of plain old sugar. This will help them penetrate the market for diabetics who crave for the sweetness, but without the calories of sugar.

From this point forward, neither A-brand nor B-brand are competing directly with each other anymore. They’ve both etched out a niche market segment for themselves, away from the commodity sugar.

So is one brand better than the other? Not necessarily. But having a brand identity helps you to stand out from the rest of the other unbranded products.

But don’t assume that creating and maintaining a brand is effortless. It takes investment in time, effort and money, to make a successful brand identity.

1.4 Little Susie’s Lemonade Stand

Little Susie sells ice lemonade in front of her house during the school holidays. Her product is nothing more than a

glass of lemonade, topped with ice. So how does her lemonade compete with other lemonade stands? More importantly, how does she compete with commercially produced lemonade, sold in disposable plastic bottles?

Unlike the previous story about different types of sugars, Susie's lemonade is just that, plain old lemonade. For the lack of a better word, Susie's essentially selling commodity lemonade... If you can consider lemonade a commodity at all in the first place.

Little Susie's lemonade is *organically* branded as *Susie's* lemonade. We'll elaborate more on "organic branding" in Chapter 8, so keep on reading. Susie's lemonade doesn't stand out because her product is better than, or different from her competitors' offerings. Instead, her customers, most of whom are her neighbours, are happy with the fact that they're buying from Susie herself. Her name *is* the brand identity. Her product may be identical to the other commercially available lemonades, but none of them are sold by Susie herself.

Of course, this only makes sense if her customers are happy with her service. Perhaps the mere interaction with their neighbour's daughter helps to keep them happy. Besides, supporting your neighbours' business ventures is indirectly promoting good neighbourliness too.

So if you're buying lemonade from Little Susie, you're essentially supporting a locally produced and sold product. You're contributing to the local economic cycle.

1.5 The Pepsi Challenge

Back in 1975, soft drink giant PepsiCo¹ challenged Coca-Cola by launching a global advertising campaign called the Pepsi Challenge². If you're interested to know the whole story, look it up. But the gist is Pepsi setting up tables in busy malls, inviting the public to a blind taste test. The objective was to keep a score of how many people preferred one brand of cola over the other.

It didn't really matter whether Team Pepsi or Team Coke actually won the blind taste test. Asking different people will yield you different results anyway. Instead, take a step back and look at the big picture. What was it exactly that the two soft drinks giants were comparing?

Take a plunge and peek underneath the two beautifully crafted façades of the two brands. They were essentially competing “*my cola beverage*” against “*your cola beverage*”. As childish as it may seem, that's exactly what the whole deal was all about.

If you quantify all the variables between these two brands scientifically, the difference is actually negligible. Hence, it's safe to say that the two cola beverages are “the same” with each other. Just make sure you don't ask a Coke fanboy or a Pepsi fangirl. Otherwise, you'll risk starting World War 3...

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/PepsiCo>

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pepsi_Challenge

1.6 Introducing A New Cola Contestant

Comparing one giant soft drink brand against another giant soft drink brand is one thing. Now throw a spanner into the well-oiled engine by comparing both of these giants against a lesser known brand. Whilst we're at it, why not compare them against a retailer's house brand cola beverage? Let's bring in our new contestant - *Tesco Cola*...

Hmm... I can almost hear cheering and jeering in the background... Call it what you will. But break them down to their basic components, and you end up with negligible difference between all three contestants.

Look, I'm not denying that there are subtle differences in all three recipes. What I'm saying is that the differences are *negligible* in the bigger scale of things. Differences so tiny that the cost difference is almost non-existent.

So what's the real difference that the fanboys and fangirls are all so protective over? The truth is that it's nothing more than the brand identities. It's the values and lifestyle that each brand identify with. In short, the brand name.

1.7 Coffee Vs. Coffee

Let's look at another example - coffee. Yup, the aromatic beverage that so many of us wake up to each morning.

Have you given it much thought as to why there are so many types of coffee? No, I'm not referring to the exotic beans that are harvested from geographically significant plantations. Nor am I referring to the differences in the roasting techniques. I'm referring to plain old cuppa joe. The coffee that you'll get if you don't specify what kind of coffee you want when ordering. I'm specifically referring to milk coffee.

Order a large glass of milk coffee at your neighbourhood coffee shop (fondly known as "kopitiam" here in Malaysia). It'll probably cost you an average of MYR 2.00 per glass. Now go ahead and break down the ingredients used to make this delicious glass of coffee. You'll have hot water, generic coffee grind and sweetened creamer (condensed milk if you're lucky). Of course, different coffee shops make them a little differently from the others, but again the difference is negligible.

Now, walk into your local Starbucks and order a Tall Cappuccino. That will cost you MYR 12.70³ (2022 price). Look, I know you can't compare your neighbourhood coffee shop's coffee with Starbucks' cappuccino, but hear me out. Take a look at the ingredients used to make the cappuccino. Hot water, generic coffee grind (you don't get exotic beans for the regular cappuccino) and milk.

Notice the similarities between the two? Of course you can always argue that Starbucks uses fresh milk, not canned

³ <https://tehtalk.com/starbucks-menu-malaysia/>

sweetened creamer. Or the coffee is pressed out of an exotic espresso machine under consistent temperature.

Try asking an accountant to compare these two products. I'll bet that he/she will tell you that the final costing still doesn't run that far from each other. Of course, we'll ignore the exorbitantly overinflated operating overheads. We're strictly looking at the costing of the product itself, the glass of milk coffee.

1.8 Why The Big Price Difference?

How can you justify the five fold increase in the price of what's essentially the "same" beverage? I posed this exact question once to a lecture hall full of advertising undergraduates, back in 2008.

After a brief hive of activity, the students proposed two reasons for this strange phenomenon. I'll assume that you're probably on the same page as my students back then. And I'm going to debunk both answers right here, right now.

(a) "Starbucks Sells Better Quality Coffee"

Granted, Starbucks purchases coffee beans from a reliable source, and uses fresh milk to make their cappuccino. We can't measure the "quality" (an intangible), so let's take a look at what we can measure,

the cost price. Again, granted, there's still a difference in the cost price between the two types of coffee beans. But is one five times more expensive than the other?... No... Not even close.

Hence, can you really say that Starbucks sells "better quality" coffee? And by that, I mean five times better than the other?... No...

(b) "Starbucks Offers Better Service"

Retrace your steps in detail, how exactly do you order a glass of milk coffee from your neighbourhood coffee shop? You walk in, take a place at an empty table, and wait for the waiter to come take your order. A few minutes later, the waiter serves your coffee to you *at your table*, and get this, *in an actual glass*.

Now repeat the same process at your local Starbucks. You join the queue at the bar and patiently wait for your turn. When your turn comes, you place your order with the barista. You pay for your order, and step aside whilst your order is processed. A few minutes later, when your name is called, you *walk up to the bar to collect your order*. And what about the vessel that your cappuccino is served in?... *A paper cup* with a thin strip of corrugated cardboard to protect your delicate fingers from the hot coffee?...

So what do you think? Which is better service? Being served by a waiter at your table, or queueing (twice) for your coffee? And let's not forget the difference between

the two types of vessel your coffee is served in. Would you prefer an actual glass, and drink like an able-bodied adult? Or would you prefer a paper cup, and drink like a child in a class party?

1.9 So How Do You Justify The Difference?

At the end of the day, it all boils down to brand identity. Which brand do you identify yourself with? Are you Team Coke or Team Pepsi, either or neither? Are you willing to pay more for a branded product when compared to a generic, or even a commodity product? If so, how much more?

Across the board, you'd probably noticed that "branded" products or services tend to sell at a premium when compared to the average. Whether household electrical appliances or car rentals, luxury wristwatches or hotel room rates. Of course, big brands differentiate themselves from the masses with promises of "quality" products or services. And there's no way to quantify the value of such offers. It all boils down to the perceived value that each brand projects.

Does it mean that if you spend a lot of money to advertise your brand, you can also raise your asking price?... Not exactly. Branding and advertising are something that most people get confused over. They're related, but they're not exactly the same.

2. Branding Vs. Advertising Vs. Marketing

Most people can't differentiate between what's branding and what's advertising. In fact, many simply assume that they're one and the same... They're not. Advertising is part of branding, but not vice versa. Likewise, advertising is also part of marketing, but not vice versa. And to make matters even more confusing, branding is not related in any way whatsoever with marketing... Confused yet?... Good, now let's proceed by describing what each of them are in detail.

2.1 What Is Marketing?

In the bigger scheme of things, marketing is essentially the activity that supports sales. They help channel relevant information that the sales department needs in order to do their job: close sales. Marketing also helps to funnel potential customers to the relevant sales people too.

Marketing's scope is huge to say the least, and I'm not gonna pretend that I know all of them. But one of their more relevant responsibilities is understanding who their target market is. What demographics they fall under, their lifestyles, spending patterns, likes and dislikes. Basically, it's their job to understand what makes the customers tick. And making them tick is marketing's specialty.

Marketing sees the whole business landscape through the bird's eye view. They crunch through lots of data to better visualise how the sales patterns develop over the seasons. Through this data, they're able to analyse the buying habits of the customers.

Armed with these "intelligence" they can guide the sales department to zoom in on the kill... I mean sale... And for this reason, I refer to the marketing as the tactical support for sales.

Let's compare this to a military campaign. The sales department is the foot soldiers, the actual boots on the ground. Their primary job is to fight the enemy, to capture grounds, and occupy them.

Being on the frontline, their view is often obscured by the landscape and by confrontation with the enemy forces. They can't see what lies beyond the horizon, or what's behind the hills. More often than not, they can't even see their objectives at all. And fighting blindly in the dark is a total waste of resources. They need to know what battles to fight, and what battles to avoid. They need to reserve their resources for fighting battles that are winnable, and to yield results.

In this scenario, marketing department is akin to the field officers. They don't get involved in the actual fighting, and are usually placed far away from the frontline. Instead, they're tasked with overseeing the battlefields, and guiding each of the battalions through its battles. They move each

battalion like chess pieces on an oversized chessboard. They also have additional information about the enemy's positions through various intelligence assets too.

Ultimately, they're also tasked to analyse the enemy's strengths and weaknesses. Then crunch all the data to better predict the enemy's next moves. Finally, to mobilise their battalions to engage the enemy in battles that would be advantageous to them.

Likewise, marketing department's job is to support the sales department with all the information they need to do their jobs. You can't expect the sales people to go out and sell to anybody and everybody. You'll end up with a very low closure rate.

Approaching only customers who are likely to buy will yield a higher closure rate. The marketing department's responsibility is to identify who these customers are, and where to find them. Then feed all the relevant information to the sales department. The sales department can then choose to fight only the battles that they're more likely to win. In other words, get a higher closure rate for their sales activities.

2.2 What's Advertising To Marketing?

Now you know what marketing department's job is in a nutshell. But how does advertising fit into the marketing

job scope? Well, to better understand, you'll have to think of advertising as an outsourced, executable job. Their job is to achieve their objectives. And these objectives often include drawing attention to their offerings, whether products or services.

Before we dive into this particular rabbit hole, let's break down what advertising is all about. And remember, advertising is nothing more than just an executable job, an activity. At its core, advertising consists of two components. Two equal, but very different components :-

(a) The Message

This is the deliverable, the payload, of the advertising activity. This is what you want your audience to receive, digest, and hopefully be persuaded. The message can be a text passage, an infographic, a narration, a composite photo, a video, etc. Basically, this is what you pay an ad agency or designer to prepare for you.

(b) The Delivery Vehicle

This is how you deliver your message to your intended audience. This is the media space that you "rent" to hitch a ride on, to deliver your message to your audience. Examples include TV ads, radio ads, billboard, newspaper, magazine, leaflets, banner ads on websites, etc. The bigger the exposure, the more expensive the "rental" is.

Marketing departments can take advantage of advertising as a way to selectively hype up their offerings. It could be

in a form of seasonal offers, launching of a new model, or simply keeping your brand visible. But at the end of the day, you'll still have to recognise advertising for what it is. It's just one of the many tools that you have at your disposal, to aid in your marketing job.

Henceforth, understand that advertising is merely a subset of marketing. It's there to help marketing departments accomplish their job. Advertising doesn't override marketing activities. In a pinch, marketing can even do their job without advertising. It's not ideal, but it's doable. But advertising can't do anything unless they have a marketing direction. Advertising is *dependent* on marketing.

2.3 So What Is Branding Then?

In Chapter 1, we've already defined that a brand is nothing more than an identity. Regardless whether it's the identity of a product, a service, or even the company behind it. Henceforth, branding is the activity of developing and/or expressing the brand identity.

Perhaps there's a certain trait about yourself that you want to express. Or maybe a certain philosophy or belief that has since been incorporated into your practice. Hence, the activity of expressing these messages is what branding is all about.

Let's visualise this in the same military context as we did in marketing earlier. Branding is comparable to the flag officers in the military, the generals and admirals. They oversee the whole theatre of war, just as how the field officers oversee the battlefields. And they're ultimately responsible to the country, or the political leaders of the country. Hence, they shoulder the heaviest responsibilities of the outcome of the war.

Part of their responsibilities is to provide leadership for the field officers to fight their battles. And the other part is to fight the war as mental chess match with the opposing leadership. Are they strong in static warfare? Or perhaps quick cavalry charges to strike where it hurts them the most, and then quickly withdraw? Do they occupy a conquered piece of land, or continue to push forward to engage a retreating enemy?

What if they're commanding the retreating army? Do they drop everything and bid a hasty retreat, saving as many soldiers as possible? Do they slash and burn, making it hard for their enemy to live off the land that they just captured?

Let's put this into perspective. Say you're a Mongol horde general, and you have the best cavalry horsemen ever known. Your enemies are mounting an amphibious landing on the beaches of your homeland. You're tasked to drive them away. What do you do? Would you mount a static defence on the beaches? Would you turn your expert horseback archers into point defence archers? Of course

not. You're not fighting the fight that you're great at. You're merely reacting to the situation. Don't do that.

Instead of driving them off the beaches of your land, allow your enemies to mount the arduous beach landing unopposed. Lull them into thinking that it's an easy invasion. Once they've landed, and are busy turning their attention towards the logistics of setting up camp, launch your cavalry attack. Their defence will be totally caught off guard, as their attention is divided. Strike hard, strike deep, and quickly withdraw before they even know what hit them.

This will keep them on their toes the whole time they're on the beach. Do they set up a defensive line in anticipation of further attacks? Or do they continue with the logistics of unloading supplies from the ships? Harass them a couple more rounds per day in the next few days. At the end of it all, your enemy might just think it's simply not worth invading your land at all.

Ultimately, if you're good at something, you'd want your audience to know about it. And building the awareness of your strength is what branding's all about.

If you have the world's best cavalry horsemen, make it known to the world, especially your potential enemies. Strike fear in their hearts. Instil so much fear in them that they can't afford to let their guard down, not even for a minute. If they do, they won't even know if and when you will descend upon them. And when they finally come to

their senses, your cavalry have already left a trail of destruction in their wake.

And *that's* what branding is all about.

2.4 What's Advertising To Branding?

Similar to advertising's relationship with marketing, it's just one of the many tools available for the branding initiative. Advertising is just another tool to help disseminate your brand message. It also similarly consists of the same two components: the message (payload) and the delivery vehicle. Instead of delivering messages for short-term marketing activities, it's delivering a long-term messages to instil your brand identity.

Just like how advertising doesn't override marketing's activities, it also doesn't override branding's activities either. Likewise, branding can do their job without advertising, but advertising can't do anything unless they have a branding direction.

At the end of the day, advertising is just one of the many tools to help convey the brand's message. A very effective tool no doubt, but nevertheless, it's just a tool.

2.5 So What's The Confusion All About?

It's true that there exists some confusion between what's advertising and what's branding. Some people believe that they're one and the same, since you literally get the same services from the same entity. It probably started when some business owners try to bundle "branding services" with their in-house services.

Let's take a look at a comparable scenario with the typical requirement of printing business cards. In the printing industry, charges are commonly quoted based on the amount of printing work you order. For business cards, you're quoted based on the number of boxes (100 pieces of card per box) you order. And in the Malaysian context, it's common to shop around to find a printer who quotes the lowest price.

In order to compete, some printers try to sweeten the deal by offering customers "free" design for the said cards. Fast forward several years later, all printers are offering the same "free" design if customers print with them.

By then, every customer comes to expect "free" design service from every printer. This design service, which is an intangible, now holds no value whatsoever. The only value from the transaction is solely based on the tangible "number of boxes" you order.

If you paid attention, you'd have noticed two humongous problems. The first is that the design service, which is the

most capital-intensive input, now holds zero value. Why would people enrol into universities and study graphic design if they can't earn an honest living from it?

Secondly, perhaps the most damaging misconception, is that people now expect all printers to offer in-house design services. And if that's not bad enough, they expect to get this most valuable part of the transaction for *free*...

Likewise, clients engaging ad agencies to design ad campaigns for them also expect them to throw in branding services too. Why?... Well, perhaps because nobody told them that ad agencies specialise in designing the ads, not designing brand identities?

And ad agencies are slowly killing themselves by bundling "free" branding services. By keeping their clients' attention on the tangibles (final designs and media placements), they're emphasising that brand direction is "free".

Fast forward a few years later, clients now expect branding services as "free" add-ons to the advertising packages. Branding, the most valuable component, is now reduced to nothing more than just a "free" add-on. So how can we honestly expect the general public not to get confused by what's advertising and what's branding?

The solution?... Be clear-cut about what's chargeable for advertising services and what's chargeable for branding services. And if branding isn't your forte, just admit it.

Yeah, I know... Easier said than done...

3. Product Or Service Brand

Most people are familiar with branded products. Whether the individual brand of products, or a branded group of products. In fact, some are so successful that their brand names have become common nouns. Called eponyms, they're used to describe all similar products. Let's take a look at some examples.

3.1 Velcro

Yup, I'm pretty sure that many people are baffled with this one. Velcro⁴ is actually a registered brand name, owned by British company, Velcro IP Holdings LLP. The common noun for the product that we link to the name "Velcro" is the hook-and-loop fastener. Yes, I know, it's very long, and not exactly memorable. Hence it's not surprising that many simply call all hook-and-loop fasteners as "Velcro".

This is an example with an almost indistinguishable brand identity. It's not hard to imagine, since they invented it, and were the first to offer such products in the market. All subsequent manufacturers simply designed their products based on the same template. Some don't even bother to give it a brand, since they're all eponymously known as "Velcro" anyway. What about you? What do *you* call it? Hook-and-loop fasteners?... Nah... I don't think so...

⁴ <https://www.velcro.com>

3.2 Milo

This one is another heavyweight in the brand identity department. Popular in Asia, Africa and Australasia, Milo⁵ is a chocolate flavoured malted beverage. Originally sold as granular concentrate, which is mixed with hot water or milk to make the beverage. Today, Milo is also available as breakfast cereal, energy bar, canned or boxed ready to drink, etc.

Just like Velcro from above, mention the name “Milo”, and the vision of a rich chocolaty beverage comes to mind. But what’s the common noun of a Milo beverage? Well, it’s simply called “chocolate flavoured malted beverage”... Imagine telling your waiter *“I’ll have an iced chocolate flavoured malted beverage”* the next time you visit your favourite restaurant... I’m sure you’ll agree that *“I’ll have an iced Milo”* is a whole lot easier to say.

Are there any equivalent products from other brands?... Of course there are. The common brands that come to mind are Ovaltine⁶, Vico⁷, even the ever popular Horlicks⁸ in chocolate flavour. However, they’re almost never available as part of the beverage menu of any restaurant.

⁵ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Milo_\(drink\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Milo_(drink))

⁶ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ovaltine>

⁷ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vi-Co>

⁸ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Horlicks>

The brand “Milo” is very significant, but coffee shops that list “Milo” in their menu often don’t actually use Milo. More often than not, most neighbourhood coffee shops use generic powdered chocolate flavoured malted beverage to make your “Milo” beverage.

Is that even legal?... Well, technically it’s not. It’s akin to baiting and switching. They bait you with Milo, and then serve you a generic brand instead. But how exactly do you enforce it when the term “Milo” is used as a generic name, a common noun?

3.3 Uber

Mention the name Uber⁹, and the app-based hail riding comes into mind. As with the other examples above, Uber has become synonymous with ride hailing service. Private car owners, driving privately registered cars, all linked to an app that offers transportation service. Not quite ubiquitous enough to be used as a common noun yet, as in the examples prior. But it *is* the first brand that comes to mind when somebody mentions ride hailing service.

Uber does have several significant competitors vying for the same slice of the transportation cake too. Some of those that comes to mind are like Lyft¹⁰, the second

⁹ <https://www.uber.com>

¹⁰ <https://www.lyft.com>

largest ride hailing platform after Uber. Whilst large in size, they're currently only present in the USA and Canada. So unless you're residing there, Lyft probably isn't too familiar to you.

Then there's Didi¹¹, another ride hailing giant. Originating from China, but also operating in a few other countries in East Asia, South America, Africa, and Australia. Often referred to as "Uber of China". Not surprising that people compare Didi to Uber at all, right?

Closer to home, we have Grab¹². Headquartered in Singapore, and operating in most Southeast Asian countries. Fun fact, Grab acquired Uber's Southeast Asian operations in 2018 in the largest ever deal of its kind. This makes Grab the biggest ride hailing service provider in the whole of Southeast Asia.

Of course there are other regional ride hailing operators within this sector. But if even the biggest competitors compare themselves against Uber, then other players aren't really significant on the global stage.

¹¹ <https://www.didiglobal.com>

¹² <https://www.grab.com>

3.4 Visa

How can we discuss about the service industry if we don't include credit card service, right? There are just a handful of players in this industry, but partnering with banks worldwide literally makes them available worldwide. And the biggest credit card company in terms of number of card holders is none other than Visa.¹³ Even the second largest credit card company, MasterCard¹⁴, only comes in at two-third the size of Visa.

American Express¹⁵ and Discover¹⁶, whilst not exactly credit card companies per se, come in at a distant third and fourth. At only 20% and 10% the size of Visa respectively, it's not surprising that not many people really know much about them.

Not commonly referred to as a common noun yet, but the brand "Visa" is synonymous with "credit card". In fact, anywhere around the world that accepts credit card, you can bet they also accept Visa.

¹³ <https://www.visa.com>

¹⁴ <http://mastercard.com>

¹⁵ <https://www.americanexpress.com>

¹⁶ <https://www.discover.com>

3.5 Building A Product Or Service Brand

The advantage of owning a well-known brand is that people recognise your product or service. Any other player in the same market segment will inevitably be compared against your brand. Often, this brand will be the preferred choice, sometimes, the only choice. It's the reason why people automatically choose Google as their default search engine over Bing. Or choose to drink Coke over Tesco Cola. In extreme cases, queue at Starbucks for a cappuccino, rather than ordering milk coffee at a generic neighbourhood coffee shop.

There's probably no discernible difference between the top brands and generic offerings. They may even be identical in quality or manufacturing. For all you know, they may even be manufactured in the same factory too. The only difference is the brand identity itself. But it is this brand that somehow drives customers over to them. At the end of the day, customers aren't simply purchasing a generic product. They're purchasing a branded, trusted product.

The question is this: do you have a product or a service that drives customers to you? Do you have a product or service that customers compare against other offerings?