Branding During Recession: The Brand Managers' Perspective

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Abstract: *Thepurposeofthispaperistoaddress the concerns of brand managersin managing the performance of their brands during recessionary times. The study is conducted by means of an exploratory qualitative study using phenomenological approach. The specific purpose is to explore the branding and marketing activities attempted by brand managers in India to increase brand value. The paper begins by evaluating the world of branding and brand equity. After establishing the premise that power of a brand lies in the consumers mind as per the customer-based brand equity, the paper discusses the research methodology, results and interpretations. The paper provides the insight of marketing activities that brand managers can use in the time of recession. This paper analyses factors that influence brands' value and also tries to understand the consumer drivers to buy an appropriate brand.The paper has implications for brand managers in emerging markets like India, throughwhichitispossibletoeffectivelymanagebrands in recessionary times. This paper has great value for future research as the results can constitute a starting point for in-depth research in future. The paper concludes by acknowledging the limitations of the study, discussing the managerial implications of its ûndings, and by identifying future research opportunities for scholars within this area.*

Keywords: *Brands, branding, recession, consumer behaviour, brand manager*

Introduction

What do Coke, Dell and Oprah Winfrey have in common? They're all iconic brands that leaveconsumers longing for more of whatever they're offering. It's difficult to read a newspaper, magazine, or blog or watch a web series or film without reference to brands. A former C.E.O of Coca Cola while expressing his views on power of brands had said that if all his factories burnt down it wouldn't bother him half as much as it would if his brand collapsed. ".Brand is sum total of psychological (thoughts, perceptions, images, beliefs) and experiential aspect (all points of contact with the brand) of a company's offering. According to American Marketing Association, a brand is a name, term, sign, symbol, design, or a combination of them intended to identify the goods and services of one seller and differentiate them from competitors. Brands matter to both consumers and manufacturers. Brand is an identity, promise, risk reducer, and signal of quality and trust to the consumer. Brands matter to manufacturers because it is a means of legally protecting unique features, signal of quality level to satisfied customers, means of endowing products with unique associations, source of competitive advantage and more importantly a source of financial returns (Keller, 1993).

Branding is the process of endowing products and services with the power of a brand (Kotler & Keller, 2015)As per the customer-based brand equity model proposed by Kevin Keller in 1993, the power of brand confines in customers mind. The power of a brand lies in what customers have learned, felt, seen, and heard about brand as a result of their experiences over time. Professor

Theodore Levitt (marketing professor at Harvard Business School) beautifully brought out the importance of branding when he said that the new competition is not between what companies produce in their factories but between what they add to their factory output in the form of packaging, services, advertising, customer service, financing, warehousing, and other things that people value.

Branding is not about one's product offering or marketing effort. It is more about the customer, and how to develop a meaningful relationship with the customer—what is often called the "customer experience." The father of modern management, Peter Drucker, had said that the purpose of business is not to make money, but to create a customer and to satisfy that customer. Branding is the process of creating a value proposition and communicating its core promise to target customers. As SethGodin says 'brandingisnotmarketing—instead itshouldinspire, lead, and tap into the brand's passions so you'll tap into your customers' passionandbuildacommittedfollowing. The marketing philosopher, ZigZiglar had said that people don't buy brands for logical reasons but for emotional reasons. Thesecustomer-centricprinciplesareessentialtounderstandwhat branding is really all about?

Today's customers are spoilt for choice. All product categories are inundated with multiple offerings from multiple competitors. We are living in an age of information overload. New technology has advanced so much that we are constantly inundated with communication messages wherever we go, and the number of options to consider for any purchase decision can be overwhelming these days. With all the clutter today, marketers face the awesome challenge of somehow getting their brand to stand out in this overcrowded world. The number and complexity of consumer choices are increasing all the time, yet our mental capacities to process the same and the hours in a day remain the same. Customers have the daunting job of examining and absorbing the differences among a vast array of product brands and their extended types, sizes, and packages, and making a quick purchase decision. This is where customer can take recourse in branding that will enable the consumer to make their purchase decision more easily.

Branding Using the Customer-Based Brand Equity Approach

Brand equity is the incremental discounted future cash flows that would result from a product having its brand name in comparison with the proceeds that would accrue if the same product did not have that brand name (Simon & Sullivan, 1990). Brand equity is defined in terms of the marketing effects uniquely attributable to the brand (Keller, 1993. There are two general motivations for studying brand equity. The first one is the financial motivation to estimate the value of a brand (for accounting purposes in terms of asset valuation for the balance sheet, or for merger, acquisition) and the second reason is the strategy-based motivation to improve marketing productivity.A company's most valuable asset for improving marketing productivity is the knowledge that has been created about the brand in consumers' minds from the firm's investment in previous marketing programs. Financial valuation issues will have little relevance, if there is no underlying value for the brand or managers do not know how to exploit that value by developing profitable brand strategies.Keller (1993) conceptualized brand equity from the perspective of the individual consumer and called it as customer-based brand equity (CBBE). It involves consumers' reactions to an element of the marketing mix for the brand in comparison with their reactions to the same marketing mix element attributed to a fictitiously named or unnamed version of the product or service. Two important points emerge from this conceptualization. First, marketers should take a broad view of marketing activity for a brand and recognize the various effects it has on brand knowledge, and how changes in brand knowledge affect traditional outcome measures such as sales. Second, marketers must realize that the long-term success of all future marketing programs for a brand is greatly affected by the knowledge about the brand in memory that has been established by the firm's short-term marketing efforts. Customer-based brand equity is defined as the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand (Keller, 1993). Three important concepts are included in the definition are 1) differential effect, 2) brand knowledge, and 3) consumer response to marketing.According to Keven Keller, differential effect is determined by comparing consumer response to the marketing of abrand with the response to the same marketing of a fictitiously named or unnamed version of the product or service. Brand knowledge is defined in terms of brand awareness and brand image and consumer response to marketing is defined in terms of consumer perceptions, preferences, and behaviour arising from marketing mix activity. According to Keller's definition of CBBE, a brand will have positive (negative) customer-based brand equity if consumers react more (less) favourably to the product, price, promotion, or distribution of the brand than they do to the same marketing mix element when it is attributed to a fictitiously named or unnamed version of the product or service. Favourable consumer response and positive CBBE can lead to enhanced revenue, lower costs, and greater profits. Brand knowledge is central to CBBE and the favourability, strength, and uniqueness of the brand associations play a critical role in determining the differential response. The actual nature of how the responses differ depends on consumers' evaluations of these associations, as well as the particular marketing mix element under consideration.

Building CBBE customer-based brand equity requires the creation of a familiar brand that has favourable, strong, and unique brand associations. Keller (1993) suggested the following three important steps to build CBBE.

- Choose appropriate brand identities or brand elements like the brand name, logo, symbol, and integrate them into the supporting marketing program. The brand identities selected should be memorable, meaningful, likable, adaptable and protectable. Brand managers 'mix and match' brand identities to maximize brand equity. Strong brands have number of valuable brand identities that directly reinforce each other
- Develop supporting marketing programs that are designed to enhance brand awareness and establish favourable, strong, and unique brand associations in consumers mind so that consumers purchase the product or service. Develop appropriate marketing strategy to increase brand awareness and familiarity. Frequent and prominent mentions in advertising and promotion vehicles can intrusively increase consumer exposure to the brand, as can event or sports sponsorship, publicity, and other activities. This points out to the fact that brand managers should remain focussed in developing appropriate marketing programs without compromising on its uniqueness.
- Leverage secondary associations that create brand beliefs. The definition of CBBE does not distinguish between the sources of brand beliefs. It hardly matters, if the equity is enhanced because of beliefs being created by the marketer or by some other source of influence such as reference groups or publicity. All that matters is the favourability, strength, and uniqueness of brand associations which, combined with brand awareness, can produce differential consumer response to the marketing of a brand (Fishbein and Ajzen 1975). Scondary brand associations means creating brand equity by "borrowing" it from other sources like the company making the product, identification of product origin, channels of distribution, co-branding and ingredient branding, licensing, celebrity endorsements, through sponsorship, and third-party sources (through awards or reviews).

Branding During Recession

A recession represents a low probability, high impact situation perceived by key stakeholders to threaten the viability of an organization

(Pearson& Clair, 1998).Economic downturns are closely linked to the concept of business cycles and therefore also called as crisis cycle (Mattick, 1981). Economic downturn or recession does not affect all companies in a similar way. In fact, the company's operations before crisis should affect its performanceafter crisis (Kuran, 1988).In a time of recession, companies and brands look for ways to quickly reduce costs and consolidate operations. Therefore, some companies restrict their marketing expenses associated with the formation of image and brand value, while others seek to use the recession as an opportunity to strengthen the competitive position and to defeat their market rivals. Literature contains numerous studies that have found positive relationships between trustworthiness and customerloyalty. Sometimes, a moderate-valued product may be more credible to customers due to the perception that they offer what they advertise or specify. So, truthfulness in this regard may also yield higher brand integrity as compared to the competitors who speak higher but present less (Alam et al., 2012). As proposed by Keller (1993), the main objectives of brand management are creating brand awareness and image. Thisisachievedbycreating an identity that reflectstheideal image of thebrand. Market orientation alone may not always induce advisable results in any market situation (Hamel &Prahalad, 1994). It is important to recognize the importance of the brand in creating company value and analyse effective marketing activities forming a good image of the brand that are applied during recession. One of the key determinants of survival and growth of business during economic downturn or recession is to have strong and valuable brand. Therefore, there is a need to intensify marketing activities associated withthe brand during recession than in good times. The present study seeks to identify the essence and scope of contemporary techniques of brand management used in recession. This article explores the marketing tools that are used by companies to maintain or strengthen the value of their brands in the conditions of an economic downturn or recession.

What is a Recession?

The most universal, and most cited, deûnition of recession isa period of two consecutive quarterly declines in real GDP (Shenk, 2008). A recession is a signiûcant decline in economic activity spread across the economy, lasting more than a few months, normally visible in real GDP, real income, employment, industrial production, and wholesale-retail sales (NBER, 2008). The current recession on account of the COVID 19 pandemic has impact on the world economy in a big way. The International Monetary Fund's April 2020 World Economic Outlook has predicted this to be the worst recession since the Great Depression in 1930s. Global growth in 2020 is projected to fall to -3 percent, resulting in an unprecedented downgrade of 6.3 percentage points from January 2020. The cumulative loss to global GDP over 2020 and 2021 could be around 9 trillion dollars, greater than the combined GDPs of Japan and Germany. The COVID-19 pandemic has severely impact growth across all regions of the World. Both advanced and developing economies are in recession. Growth is projected at -6.1 percent in advanced economies and -1 percent in developing economies. Speaking at the annual spring meeting of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, the IMF Managing Director, Kristalina Georgieva said that a large global contraction in the first half of 2020 is inevitable. Prospects thereafter depend on the intensity and efficacy of containment efforts, progress with developing vaccines and therapies, the extent of supply disruptions, shifts in spending patterns, the impact of tighter financial conditions on activity, and the size of the policy response.

Research Methodology

This exploratory study was conducted using phenomenological approach of qualitative inquiry. Phenomenological approach was selected as it is best suited for a research study where it is important to understand several individuals' common or shared experiences of a phenomenon. It is important to understand the common experiences to develop practices or policies, or to develop a deeper understanding about the features of the phenomenon. Polkinghorne (1989) recommends that researchers can interview from 5 to 25 individuals whohave all experienced the phenomenon. As per the mandate of a phenomenological study, the data was collected from 11 branding and advertising experts working for various branding and advertising agencies operating out of India. Executives across the industry were identified and interviewed to gain insight into a range of product and brand categories. The executives interviewed include strategic planning head, strategy officer, national planning director, senior vice president, senior country manager, brand activation manager, and a CEO. They were selected as these individuals can share their experiences of the effect of the recession on brands they manage from a managerial and strategic point of view.The interview guidelines followed the approach of asking the same speciûc questions to each of the participants. The questions were open-ended to gain an in-depth insight into the current situation. 27% of respondents were females. The respondents experience in their respective line of work ranged from 15 to 25 years. A broad profile of the respondents is provided in Table1.

Table 1: Respondents Profile

S. No	Company type	Gender	Respondent's position
1	Advertising agency	Male	Strategic Planning Head
2	Media planning	Male	North India's national planning head
3	Brand consultancy	Male	CEO
4	FMCG	Female	National Planning Director
5	Advertising agency	Male	Head Strategy
6	Media planning	Female	National Planning Director
7	Advertising agency	Male	National Planning Director
8	Brand consultancy	Female	Senior VP and Head of Planning
9	Advertising agency	Male	National Strategy Head
10	FMCG	Male	Brand Activation Manager
11	Advertising agency	Male	Chief Intelligence Officer

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed by going through the interview transcriptions and highlighting 'significant statements' or quotes that that provided an understanding of how the respondents experienced recession in their capacity as brand managers (Moustakas, 1994). This was followed by developing clusters of meaning from these significant statements into themes. These significant statements and themes were then used to write a description of what the brand mangers experienced (textural description). The textual descriptions were used to writea composite description that presented the 'essence' of the phenomenon. The primary focus was on the the common experiences of the brand mangers' because all experiences have an underlying structure.

Results and Interpretations

All the respondents (brand mangers' and advertising agency heads) felt that cutting marketing budgets at this point of time would be foolish. Recessionary times like these always throw new opportunities. Consumer behaviour is changing on account of the recessionary environment and brand manager needs to identify short term and long term opportunities for their brands without getting confused between the two. Caution is warranted so that one doesn't change the DNA of the brand for something that might give a short term flip but in long term deviatethe brand for what it truly stands for in the target consumers' mind. The national planning director of an advertising agency had the following view point about the changing consumer behaviour and its impact on branding.

"The needs and wants will be fundamentally the same, however there will big change in the way people will fulfill them. For example, the need for entertainment will continue to be there but there will be increase in streaming. Things like online shopping, e-payments, laundry or salon service at home, which were earlier seen as convenience or value will now have a new meaning in life. Another change will be the realisation of the need for health. So we will see a lot of brands and companies strengthening their promise to give better health, now, be it a FMCG health product, a health menu or health insurance product".

The C.E.O of a top brand consultancy firm said that premium products will exist but people will look for evidence-backed reasons to pay for them. Expressing his views on the impact of changing consumer behaviour on branding, the head strategy of an advertising agency cautioned against focusing too much on changing behaviours and in the process forgetting to notice what stayed unchanged.The brand activation manager of a reputed fast moving consumer goods (FMCG) brand said that the hygiene narrative will impact the way consumers make choices, across categories. The head strategy of an advertising agency working with an automobile client said that the sales of premium sedans, and sports utility vehicles might be impacted, but regular models might see faster recovery. The national planning director with an advertising agency suggested against doing anything if the brand manager is unable to justify brand marketing objectives. The chief intelligence officer of a reputed advertising agency reasoned out that the meaning of the word 'essentials' is changing and brand managers need to understand and appreciate the changing definition of 'essentials'. Most of the respondents agreed that consumers were behaving differently during the current recession as compared with previous economic downturns. A respondent working for a FMCG major said that previous downturns were not quite as emotional as this one. Some brand mangers' were of the opinion that there will be a shift from 'mindless consumption' to 'mindful consumption'. Brand marketers will have to accept this reality to gain traction with consumers. The biggest shift could be consumers may not find blatant consumerism aspirational due to hard facts like having lesser disposable money. A brand manager with a FMCG major suggests brands not to go silent as a brand invests years to forge a close relationship with the consumer and difficult times like recession are the true test of any relationship. This is the time when a brand needs to stand up for its consumers, comfort them and do everything possible to help them navigate the tough times. The longer a brand is out of sight during challenging times, the longer it will take to rebound. Most of the respondents felt that there is no place for tokenism and the brand manager needs to act with compassion and add genuine value to people's lives. The respondents felt that all product and service brands which are in segments that require physical fulfilment like travel, tourism, restaurants, entertainment, live sports, real estate and sports are likely to have a tough road to recovery. On the other hand, product and service brands in segments that empower the consumer by providing remote access, convenience and wellness like select electronic goods like durables, digitally sourced services, FMCG, insurance are likely to bounce back much faster. A brand manager considers the current recession as the golden age for vacuum cleaners and dishwashers in Indian homes.

A brand manager with a FMCG major says *"it's myopic to look at the recovery from the category lens; we need to look at the recovery from the brand lens. Every sector will have some brands that will emerge stronger, while others will find it difficult to bounce back. What will separate the winners from the losers is an eye to sense changing reality and swiftly adapting it"*.

A very interesting viewpoint on changing consumer behaviour was shared by chief intelligence officer with a top advertising agency.

"*Families are changing. See how quintessential authority figures at home are doing 'chores'. They aren't that frightful anymore, are they? A sense of egalitarianism is coming into homes, communities, societies, and even the nation."*

There will be shift towards purpose-led brand communication and recessionary and post recessionary times belong to brands that are authenticabout what they promise, how they speak, why they exist. Some brand managers are of the opinion that this is the best time to innovate business value chain as some things will change permanently post-recession. The brand managers need to relook at their audience segments and channel strategy. A brand executive anticipates big changes in consumer behaviour. The old-world Indian wisdom of avoiding credit will come back in a big way. High-ticket discretionary spends and long drawn purchases (home, cars, holidays, premium white goods, etc.) will see a downfall. There will be a wave of tech adoption, even by people who were classically termed as tech laggards. Home delivery, e-commerce, e-banking, e-governance will see an impetus in the new normal. People will increasingly start managing their lives virtually and remotely. The national planning head of an advertising agency wants brand managers to rethink of their value proposition where technology will play a central role in creating value for customers. The brand experience will become crucial in winning over the competition. Brand managers need to think of brand aspects that can be automated for an enhanced customer experience. Brand managers need to be judicious with new launches. They need to look for real gaps in the market rather than notional ones. In the post-recession world a growing segment of people will reward brands that follow ethical business practices and will be critical of exploitative ones. Therefore, consumption that harms people and the environment will face opposition from governments, civil society and consumers.The new buzzword will be 'conscious consumerism'. A senior vice president and head of planning with a brand consultancy shared the following points on the increase in purpose-led brand communication:

"Empty purpose-touting will certainly become irrelevant. Brands will have to live out their purpose through real actions than just say it through cleverly written ads. We are stepping into an era of authenticity. If your brand doesn't add real value to the lives of consumers, no amount of purpose-led advertising can save you. Brands that innovate for value will win. Phoney, purpose wielding brands will eat dust".

Managerial Implications

From an economic perspective, the respondents to this study felt that the recessionary conditions had affected them. An implication of this study is that cutting marketing budgets for brands during recession is a fool hardy decision. Brand managers should be prepared to use economic downturns and recessionary times to encash on new emerging opportunities. For example, the current recession has ushered in a wave of tech adoption, even by people who were classically termed as tech laggards. Brands operating in e-commerce, e-banking, e-governance space can use this opportunity to build strong resilient brands. Brand managers also need to aware of the changing consumer behaviour on account of the recessionary environment. A very important implication of this study is that the core essence or the DNA of the brand should not change for some short-term business gain. Brand managers should avoid deviating from it truly stands for in the target consumers mind. Branding is a continuous planned activity and should not be compromised. Brand managers need to remember that things are generally never as bad as one might have expected them to be. A number of respondentspredicted a change in consumer behaviour and the need on part of brand managers to be conscious of the same while developing their brands and reconfiguring the value proposition. It is also worth noting that none of the respondents focused on price as a tool in the marketing mix that could help them in recessionary times. Although one can sense that the respondents thought consumers had become more price-sensitive and that considerable discounting had indeed taken place, an important managerial implication is that price should be a tool of last resort, used only after other strategic marketing initiatives have failed. A number of respondents focused on change in product and sales strategyas a means to cope with recessionary conditions, rather than a simple slashing of prices across the board. The respondents also observed that the recessionary times had forced them to refocus efforts, particularly on quality and the customer experience. A very important managerial insight that emerged is that recessionary times for the most opportune time to look for new opportunities and trimmingthe deadwood that might have survived in times of prosperity, but that merely added cost in times of economic downturn. Brand managers should not lose touch with customers during recessionary times. It is recommended that they stay in touch with customers, to be able to gauge their feelings, motives and behaviour, in order to serve them well and exploit this knowledge proûtably when economic conditions change.

Limitations

Like all research, this study is also subject to some limitations. Though the sample size selected is adequate from qualitative research perspective, if the researcher is seeking context and richness, the small sample used here does not allow us to generalize, or to claim that the views of the respondents presented here are representative of the entire industry. To be able to do that, a sample survey of a large number of brand mangers across different product categories needs to be undertaken. Further the respondents' company type are only from FMCG, brand consultancy, advertising agency, and media planning industries. Therefore the company type selected here are not representative and it is quite possible that brands from other product categories like services, hospitality, education, manufacturing and other goods and services might have been differentially affected by the economic conditions present when the study was undertaken. In the case of pharma, a category not included in the study, there is evidence in the business press that suggests that pharma brands have been almost anti-cyclical in their exposure to recessionary conditions. The participants in the study need to be carefully chosen to be individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon in question, so that the researcher, in the end, can forge a common understanding. Bracketing personal experiences may sometimes be difficult for the researcher to implement. The researcher needs to decide how and in what way his or her personal understandings will be introduced into the study.The respondents in this study were individuals within single organizations, and hence the results reûect their opinions only. It is quite possible that other senior individuals involved in branding might have given very different responses to the same questions. The respondents in this study represented media, brand conultancy, and FMCG goods in India, and there is no reason to believe that the views of brand executives in other parts of the world, such as England, France or Italy would have been similar.

Avenues For Future Research

There are a number of directions for future research that are suggested in this study and brand management scholars might wish to pursue in the future. From a more speciûc branding standpoint, although a qualitative study such as the one conducted here does give context and richness, a large sample survey of brand executives would permit one to generalize, and facilitate comparisons across different categories of brands. It would also be both interesting to compare insights (by means of qualitative research) and perceptions (by means of a survey) of brand executives across different geographies. This would shed further light on our respondents' observations that the world seemed to be differentially affected by the current recessionary conditions. There is also scope for longitudinal tracking research of the performance of brands along economic cycles, either by means of in-depth interviews or through large-sample surveys. It would be interesting to revisit respondents of the type engaged in this study in a year or two from now, and to see whether their views had changed.

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