



Ehrenberg-Bass
Institute for Marketing Science

**HOW BRAND DISTINCTIVENESS IS
COMMUNICATED, FROM A
CONSUMER'S PERSPECTIVE**

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Abstract

This thesis explores the topic of brand distinctiveness, which involves elements of a brand that make it stand out in the minds of consumers. Examples of distinctive elements include logos, graphics, taglines, typeface, colour, music and the structural design of a package. These elements help consumers recognise and recall a brand either when buying or through advertising.

Today's world of advertising is becoming increasingly saturated with media 'clutter' due to the extreme volume of communication (Darling, 2001). Consumers want brand choice made easier and are looking for things that help them navigate their way through the 'noise' of the category. Consumers cannot process the huge number of messages they are bombarded with daily, so brand distinctiveness ensures correct branding by establishing an obvious distinction between brands. Furthermore, elements such as colour and package shape have been suggested as a means of creating distinctiveness and can therefore be trademarked.

This thesis makes a contribution to an increasingly important area by exploring how consumers articulate distinctiveness in two contexts: in-situ and recall. Some decisions are stimulus-based, meaning they are based on stimulus in the physical environment (e.g. supermarket decisions). Other decisions are memory-based, meaning they are based on information retrieved from memory (e.g. financial service decisions) (Lee, 2002). Decisions can, however, include a mixture of both stimulus and memory-based information. In a memory-based brand decision, a brand is more likely to be considered and selected if it is more accessible in memory. In a stimulus-based brand decision, the decision is available in the environment. Brand distinctiveness enables a brand to be more readily recognisable among competitors and consequently more likely to be chosen (Lee, 2002).

This research answers three objectives. First, it aims to determine the key elements consumers believe make a brand distinctive. The purpose of this objective is to gain a

better understanding of how consumers can articulate distinctiveness across various brands and in different contexts. This objective tests multiple brand distinctive elements including colour, package shape and size, logo, advertising and typeface. It explores the prevalence of multiple elements and, as a result, determines whether certain elements are more effective and valuable than others. For example, colour versus logo versus package shape and size versus typeface.

The second objective tests whether the elements that make a brand distinctive vary between brands in a market. This objective discovers which brands differ in the type of elements consumers perceived them to have. Further, it tests whether respondents are more likely to generalise distinctive elements from one brand to another. This objective determines whether certain elements can be used to increase the distinctiveness of brands.

The third objective examines whether certain consumer influences can mediate brand distinctiveness through testing two hypotheses. The literature suggests that category familiarity and brand usage can both be a moderating influences on perceived distinctiveness (Graeff, 1999; Kent and Allen, 1994). The first hypothesis is 'a brand is more likely to be considered distinctive if a respondent currently uses a brand'. The second hypothesis is 'a brand is more likely to be considered distinctive if a respondent is familiar with the product category'. The second hypothesis is tested for the hair care industry only as the data was unavailable in the financial services industry.

Both hair care and financial service industries were selected to collect the data for several reasons. First, very little has been examined on how distinctive brand elements differ between physical goods and services. Further, it was felt that the respondents would have varying levels of brand experience and product involvement within the different samples. As mentioned, the two industries provide different contexts in which consumers may be making their brand decisions.

Three data sets are used in this thesis. A team of IQCA (Interviewer Quality Control Australia) accredited interviewers collected all data. Two of the three data sets for this

thesis were collected by telephone and the remaining set in-situ by face-to-face interviews. The research objectives were tested by asking respondents open-ended questions about which brands stood out the most and why. Further open-ended questions examined the extent of brand distinctiveness.

The findings for research objective one are that of the elements that help identify a particular brand in the hair care and financial service industries, colour is the key according to consumers. Following colour, the research that was collected in-situ found that structural design elements received a high number of associations. This was followed by shelf placement and typeface. Logos consistently received 1% of associations for each response, which therefore did not make it a distinctive element. Unlike the in-situ research, logos received a higher number of associations from the research collected through recall for the financial services industry. Characters or celebrities, slogans and font/writing style were also mentioned, but to a lesser degree, and were associated with certain brands rather than at a category level. Surprisingly, music did not receive any associations although the literature often cites music as a valuable tool to increase distinctiveness.

The findings for research objective two are that there is only a small variation in the associations for distinctive elements between brands. As mentioned, colour was the most prevalent element across all brands within both industries. The results do show, however, a very large difference in the number of associations between colour and the other distinctive elements between brands. For example, there was about a four-fold difference between colour and structural design for the research conducted in-situ. The number of associations for distinctive elements varied little between brands but each brand varied in its implementation of each specific element. For example, each brand had various distinctive colours, structural designs (i.e. different proportions and contours) and typeface (amount and style of writing).

The findings for research objective three from both studies illustrate that there is a difference between users and non-users of a brand in different contexts and that brand

usage has an effect on brand distinctiveness. Brands generally contain evaluative attributes but distinctive brands were found to contain descriptive associations. A brand, however, was not more likely to be considered distinctive if a respondent was familiar with the product category.

This thesis has laid the groundwork for future examination of brand distinctiveness. Since few previous studies have examined multiple distinctive elements, this research is a starting point for future studies.

In addition to the theoretical implications of this work, this research also has clear managerial implications that should be considered. First, brand distinctiveness involves an understanding of how consumers think and react. This thesis shows that colour is a key element of branding that helps consumers identify a brand. This finding enables a company to make colour the major focus of its identity by using a single distinctive colour.

This thesis demonstrates that in many real-world consumption situations, consumers identify a brand on a limited number of the available distinctive elements. Furthermore, the results suggest that consumers use similar cues to determine brand distinctiveness across brands. Marketers should, therefore, understand the key elements consumers associate with their brand.