

BY DAVID AAKER

# BEYOND FUNCTIONAL BENEFITS

**THERE IS A COMPULSION** to focus on functional benefits. Perhaps it is a legacy of Rosser Reeves' unique selling proposition that brought us "melts in your mouth, not in your hand."

A functional benefit is appealing. Our instinct, especially if we reside in the high-tech or B-to-B sectors, is that customers are rational and will be swayed by functional benefits. Further, when asked why they buy this brand or avoid that one, customers give functional reasons because they can and because anything else would not reflect well on them and their decision making. The resulting insights often have an inordinate influence on strategy.

But we have too much evidence chronicled by several writers, such as Dan Ariely in *Predictably Irrational*, that customers are far from rational. And we see it every day. There is little doubt that even Boeing, with piles of proposal details on new airplanes, will in the end be influenced by its gut feel. In most contexts, customers lack the motivation, time, information or competence to make decisions to maximize performance outcomes and will project functional benefits from other brand associations.

Even worse, strategies based on functional benefits are often strategically ineffective or limiting. First, customers may not believe that a brand has a functional advantage because of the conflicting claims of competitors and puffery, or may not believe the benefit represents a compelling reason to buy the brand. Second, if the functional benefit represents a point of differentiation, competitors may quickly copy it. Third, the benefit may not represent a basis of a strong, long-term relationship because there is no emotional attachment. Finally, a strong functional association confines the brand, especially when it comes to responding to changing markets or exploring brand extensions. Thus, Weight Watchers' emphasis on professional weight control limited its ability to respond to the Healthy Choice attack with a "healthy eating" identity.

Thus, it makes sense to move beyond functional benefits and consider emotional, self-expressive and social benefits as a basis for the value proposition.

## Emotional Benefits

An emotional benefit relates to the ability of the brand to make the buyer or user of a brand feel something during the purchase process or user experience. "When I buy or use this brand, I feel \_\_\_\_." Thus, a customer can feel safe in a Volvo, excited in

a BMW, energetic with Coke or warm when receiving a Hallmark card. Evian, with its "Another day, another chance to feel healthy," associated itself with the satisfied feeling that comes from a workout.

Emotional benefits add richness and depth to the brand and the experience of owning and using the brand. Without the memories that Sun-Maid Raisins evoke, the brand would border on commodity status. The familiar red package links many users to happy days of helping Mom in the kitchen (or the idealized childhood for some who wished that they had such experiences). The result can be a different user experience, one with feelings, and a stronger brand.

## Self-expressive Benefits

Brands and products, as symbols of a person's self-concept, can provide a self-expressive benefit by providing a vehicle by which a person can express him- or herself. "When I buy or use this brand, I am \_\_\_\_." A brand does not have to be Harley to deliver self-expressive benefits. A person can be cool by buying clothes at Zara, successful by driving a Lexus, creative by using Apple, a nurturing mother by preparing Quaker Oats hot cereal, frugal and unpretentious by shopping at Kmart or adventurous and active by owning REI camping equipment.

When a brand provides a self-expressive benefit, the connection between the brand and the customer is likely to be heightened. For example, consider the difference between using Olay, which has been shown to heighten one's self-concept of being gentle, sophisticated, mature, exotic, mysterious and down-to-earth, and Jergens or Vaseline Intensive Care Lotion, neither of which provides a comparable self-expression benefit but similar functional benefits.

## Social Benefits

The drive to have friends, colleagues, family and groups with common interests is intense and can generate immediate and long-term rewards. People are not only fulfilled by social relationships, they are influenced as well. Many brands have the capability of participating or even driving social benefits. "When I buy or use this brand, the type of people I relate to are \_\_\_\_."

There are several types of social benefits. Some can be stimulated by the brand, such as the Betty Crocker Mixer Web site that allows members to talk to experts and connect with others. Bikers can post pictures of their last ride on the Harley Web site.



## Ask yourself...

When I buy or use this brand, I feel \_\_\_\_\_.

When I buy or use this brand, I am \_\_\_\_\_.

When I buy or use this brand, the type of people I relate to are \_\_\_\_\_.

Others can involve affinity groups: "When I go to Starbucks, I am part of a closed club of aficionados even if I don't interact with any." Still others can involve aspirational groups: "When playing with a Titleist Pro V1, I am among a group that contains some really good golfers."

Two tips in avoiding the functional benefit trap: First, create a strong brand personality. Most brands with personalities do deliver beyond their functional benefits. Second, aspire to deliver multiple benefits. We know that providing both functional and emotional benefits is more effective than just one of the two, and this finding could probably be generalized with the right research. **m**



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