Branding for the Rest of Us

by

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Abstract

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) create 71% of private sector jobs

yet only 40% of them project growth (Ratte, 2015). Believing that a

properly constructed brand undergirds SME profitability and sustainability,

I asked: What makes strong brands? How might we make these elements

accessible to non-experts? I examined these questions through a literature

survey spanning 30 years of brand planning models, interviews with

contemporary experts, and interviews with current SME executives.

I developed the Brand Actualization Tool (BAT) to make brand

development accessible and thereby to enhance SMEs' opportunities for

growth and sustainability. BAT consists of five stages: Motivate – define

the organization's authentic brand vision; Embed – operationalize purpose

across the organization; Engage – connect the brand and offering to

customers; Evaluate – measure success with analytics; adjust activities;

and Impact – project activities' impact into the future. Next steps include

validating the positive impact I found that BAT has by increasing the

number of SMEs using it and studying their results.

Key words: brand, branding, marketing, SME branding, brand models,

brand planning tool, customer purchase behavior, purpose, vision

Dedication

This work is dedicated to Teri and Jackson, my muse and my amuser.

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1.0 Overview
1.1 Introduction

During the interviews, discussions took place regarding the flexibility and capacity of SMEs to adopt a brand-focused approach to their business. Some thought SMEs were better suited to the process that larger organizations because they were structurally more agile and had a smaller workforce. Others thought the opposite; SME leaders were so heavily engaged in the daily operations of the company that they had little time to spare. Limited resources is a challenge for all organizations, so how do they mobilise commitment of time and other resources to make brand an agent of change?

The author believes that SMEs, with fewer divisions and actors, are better positioned to make this shift than larger organizations. However, for a brand program to succeed, members of the organization must feel themselves to have a vested interest in making it happen. SMEs, with their smaller employee base, potentially possess a greater sense of connectedness than what one would find in a large, global corporation. That simplifies the creation of a strong brand from both a conceptual and operational framework. The key to success depends on employees owning the organization's story and representing its values, purpose and promise to the customer

Outsourcing brand development, such as hiring an agency or consultant, is a self-defeating process; employees are left out of the process while third party vendors do not possess the intimate knowledge of what makes the business special. The BAT approach is built around harnessing the thinking of employees, and even customers, in the first two stages, Motivate and Engage, to establish the brand framework, as employees are critical to the articulation and implementation of the brand charter throughout the organization. In order to capture that thinking, BAT employs an iterative approach (i.e. not a one-day retreat). The basic progression is to convene a series of short meetings, capturing each meeting's insights, distributing them prior to the next meeting, and repeating the process. Building the brand charter is a creative, design systems style process. Participants need time to reflect in order to make a lasting and worthy contribution.

Following an iterative approach, as outlined above, creates fertile conditions for success within an SME. BAT addresses their resource constraints by spreading the process over a number of sessions, which provides flexibility in scheduling while allowing participants to reflect on insights captured in the sessions and take that knowledge to a higher, or deeper, level.

1.2 Brand, branding and marketing

It is important to delineate the difference between brand, branding and marketing. The brand is the core of the organization, the "why" behind what the business does. Think of it as the organization's purpose, guiding light or compass. The brand then guides branding which is the operationalization of the brand/purpose in all aspects of the organization and throughout its business model. Marketing, the final stage, is the collection of activities that cause the brand to interact with customers and other external stakeholders.

To demonstrate, an organization's culture is driven by its brand/purpose and is brought to life in such activities as employee engagement, hiring practices, product performance and quality, customer centricity, service levels, external stakeholder relations – the list is endless. Marketing acts as the external manifestation of the brand in the eyes and minds of customers and other stakeholders in the marketplace.

For most audiences, marketing is probably the most obvious connection with the brand, but without the first two stages (brand and branding) in place, it has little chance of connecting with its respective audiences in meaningful ways. The success of the marketing program is dependent on the provision of an authentic value proposition which is created in the first

two stages. If that authenticity is missing in the customer experience, the brand will suffer.

1.3 Research goal

The goal of the paper is to present a new ontology of brand elements that apply to SMEs. The elements will be organized into an actionable framework for building strong brands. Using literature surveys and in-field research as the starting point, the objective is to create a process and tool to help SMEs create their brand and establish a platform that will enable them to evolve and sustain their brand as it encounters new market, competitive, cultural and stakeholder forces.

For an SME, brand is one of the few differentiators left in an environment where competition is global and unrelenting; product or service superiority is fleeting; and attention spans are shrinking. But for many SMEs, branding is seen as an option for big organizations only or a tactical activity. The intent of this project is to provide a solution that helps SMEs improve their chances of success by closing the knowledge gap, simplifying the process, and bringing brand development, branding and marketing within reach of smaller organizations.

1.4 The research question

The questions this paper seeks to answer are:

- What are the new core concepts, building blocks and relationships that make brands?

- How might we encode and make these core concepts accessible to non-brand specialists in small to medium enterprises?

1.5 Why SMEs are critical to Canada's economy

In Canada, SMEs are defined to be in the range from 1 to 500 employees; small businesses possess 0 – 99 employees, and medium size businesses have 100 – 500 employees (Economic Development Canada, 2013). They are an integral part of Canada's economic health, and over the last 10 years, 71% of all private sector jobs were created by SMEs (Ratte, 2015, p. 3). SMEs comprise 99.8% of employer businesses (98.2% small size businesses; 1.6% medium size businesses) and 89.9% of total private employment in Canada (Industry Canada, Small Business Branch, 2013).
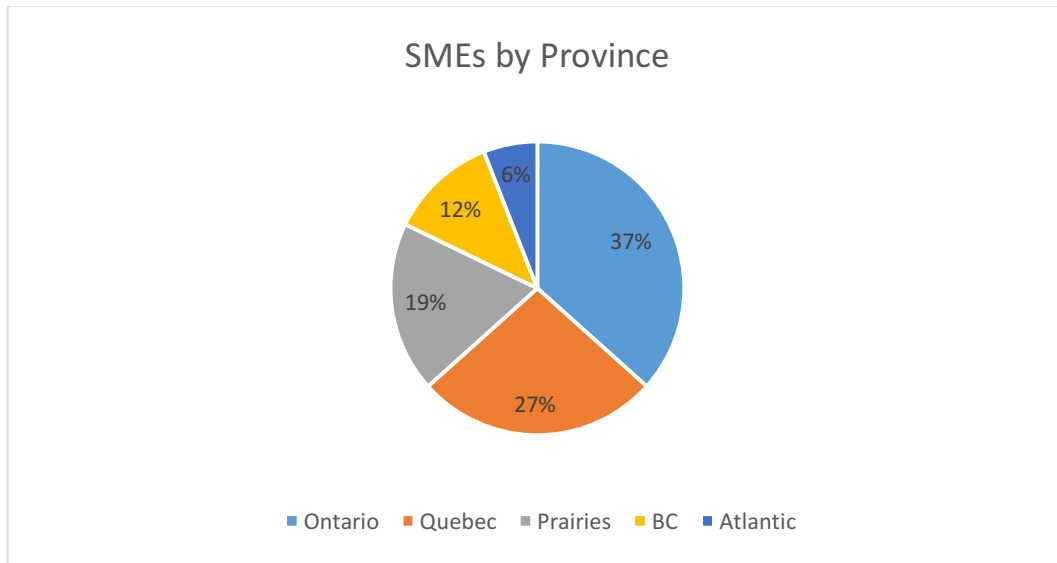
Figure 1: Geographic Distribution of SMEs

Within SMEs, medium size businesses account for 7,814 firms, with 8 of 10 having 100 - 249 employees. Their average annual revenue is $34 million, and from a national perspective, 37% are located in Ontario, 27% in Quebec, 19% in the Prairies, 12% in BC and 6% in the Atlantic Provinces. The top five sectors they participate in are Manufacturing (18%), Retail (16%), Business Services (14%), Accommodation and Food Service (13%), and Construction (8%) (BDC, 2013).
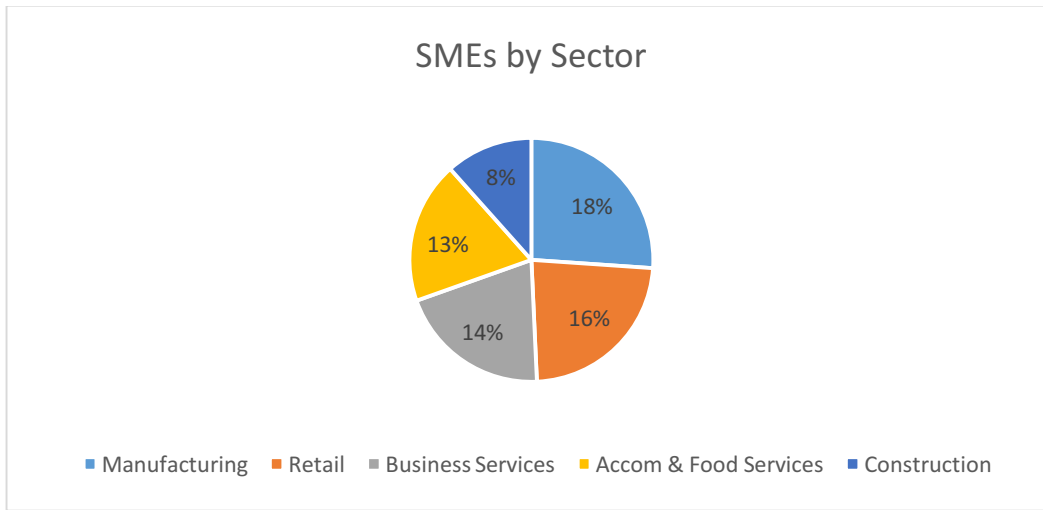
Figure 2: Sector Distribution of SMEs

They have no shortage of challenges. BDC research indicates that only four of ten companies are projecting growth. In their study, 12% are expecting strong growth, 20% or greater, while 29% are expecting sustained growth of 5% to 19%. That leaves 59% with growth rates of less than 5% (Ratte, 2015, p. 6).
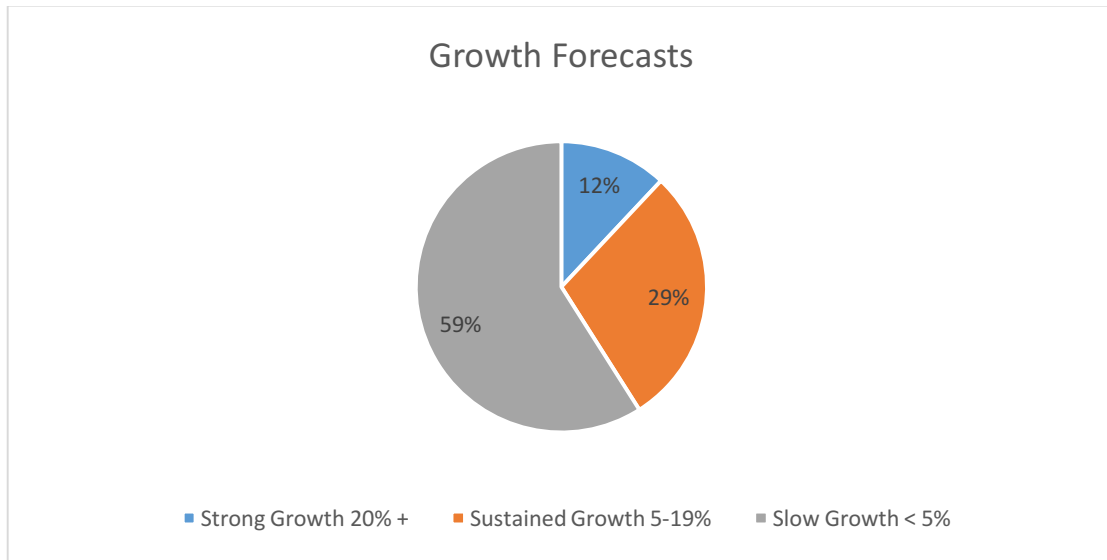
Figure 3: Growth Prospects of SMEs

SMEs are critical to Canada's financial health, yet many struggle even to sustain themselves. A potential contributor to increased success and sustainability is the use of brand as a strategic asset and guide for current and future activities.

1.6 Current research about SMEs and brand

In order to evaluate current research about brand and its usage by SMEs, a search began with results from Google, Google Scholar and the search engines of leading business schools such as Kellogg, Harvard, Penn State and Stanford. This search did not unearth any content directly related to SMEs and brand. An expanded search across the business press and service provider sources: (WARC, McKinsey, HBR, Future Brand, Google, Oracle, IBM Institute of Business Values, CMO Council, Booz&Allen-

Strategy&Business, Rotman Magazine) also produced very little about the importance of brand for SMEs. Most white papers were tactical, focused on third party solutions that automated the marketing function (e.g. HubSpot, Marketo) and concentrated on content, lead generation and conversion.

1.7 Aspirations of Work

The objective is to gain, an understanding of new brand concepts/practices and use it to create an accessible planning tool that helps SMEs create their own brand platform, and enables them to establish, evolve and sustain their brand and business in face of new market, competitive, cultural and stakeholder forces.

2.0 Research methodology

The research design consisted of a Literature Survey and one-to-one qualitative interviews with branding experts and SME senior executives.

Literature Survey: The survey had two objectives: (1) Conduct review of traditional branding practices and thinking in order to understand what has happened and is currently happening with brand planning in the marketplace. (2) Collect various branding elements, architectures and

schools of thought as a basis for a brand ontology that will form the brand design framework.

Qualitative Research: Two sets of one-to-one interviews were completed: one with branding experts in marketing communications, and the other with SME senior executives. The objective of interviewing the experts was to understand the past, current and future states of brand creation. These experts were experienced, senior level marketing communications professionals. They represented ad agencies, digital agencies, academia and brand/marketing consultants. SME senior executives were interviewed to uncover what role brand plays in their organizations. For both groups, a sample size of up to ten respondents was sought.

Sense-making: The final stage of the research phase was to synthesize key understandings from the literature survey and qualitative research and to use these findings as building blocks for a beta version of the Brand Actualization Model.

3.0 A brief history of brand

3.1 The origins of brand

The concept of brand started with the Ancient Norse and the word "Brandr" which means "to burn". According to Wolf Olins, its meaning has

evolved over time with the following associations (University of East

Anglia, 2015):

Brand Version	Timeline	Characteristics
Brand V1	from about 1660	Burning/stamping of property to signify ownership
Brand V2	from about 1820	Shifted from property to products to trademark origin and quality
Brand V3	from about 1920	Manufacturers capitalized on early mass media to move from selling products to promising pleasure by building in ideas, emotions, and better self-image into their communications.
Brand V4	from about 1980	Brand moved from products to the whole organization (corporate identity) as companies saw they could create a sense of belonging among consumers and employees.
Brand V5	from about 2000	On-line businesses that created platforms for action; they wanted consumers to use their services to create networks.

Table 1 - The evolution of brand

In 2016, the definition of brand and what it encompasses are in flux and

mutating in ways not imaginable even ten years ago. It seems that

everything and everyone is a brand and has a private or public

organization. Hollywood celebrities, tweens posting YouTube videos from

their bedrooms, and sales reps building their image on LinkedIn all talk

about their brand identity.

As the concept and application of brand becomes more commonplace, it is

important to understand how brand identity and strategy emerged as a

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business practice. The first formal introduction of branding as a business function occurred in the 1930s, when P & G introduced the Brand Manager into their organizational chart. It really took hold in marketing organizations, though, in the early 1950s when consumerism became a key business driver (Lannon, 2007).

Consumerism emerged as a significant economic force at the end of the WWII. A number of drivers coalesced to launch consumerism as a significant economic and cultural force. First, there was pent-up demand for goods from war weary populations around the globe. At the same time, factories that had been critical to the war effort were being repurposed to produce goods not related to military needs, resulting in products in all categories. Most significantly, television took mass media to a new level with its ability to reach mass audiences in a cost-efficient manner (University of East Anglia, 2015).

4.0 The evolution of brand strategy

4.1 J. Walter Thompson – discovering brand

I begin this discussion with my own experience, my first exposure to brand planning and strategy. I started my advertising career at J. Walter Thompson (JWT) in the late '80s. As a new employee, I was put through a one-year training program (these training programs are rare today) in which my cohort and I were educated in advertising practices. A significant

portion of our training focused on understanding the role of marketing communications strategy, or account planning as it was called, and how it could be used to build strong brands for our clients. To do this, we were introduced to a planning process called the T (for target) Plan.

The T Plan originated in our English head office, in the British business context, which was, at the time, ahead of North America in brand strategy leadership. JWT sent one of their senior planners to Toronto to educate us in its usage. The T Plan represented a new way of advertising planning. At its core was a belief that brands could only thrive if they developed a relationship with customers that went beyond performance and price. To achieve that goal, one had to understand the beliefs, attitudes and behaviors that influenced customer purchasing behavior. The planning process was built around five questions, as outlined below.
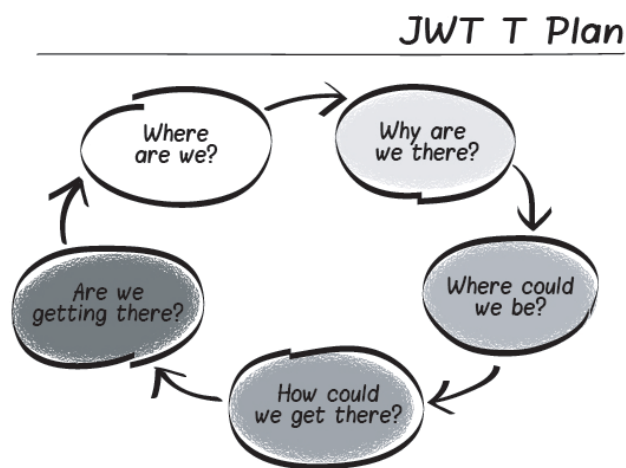
Figure 4: JWT T Plan

Details of the different stages are contained in this table.

1. Where are we?	What is the market context? Where has it been and where is it going? How does our brand against competition or consumer needs? What does our brand stand for and why? What are the opportunities, problems?
2. Why are we there?	What economic, technological and social trends affect the market. What factors affect the brand's competitive position? Which ones can be controlled, or not?
3. Where could we be?	Where, realistically, could the brand be in the future? What changes could take us there? What would that do to our competitive position?
4. How could we get there?	What objectives, strategies, sub-strategies and tactics are needed to get the brand to the next level?
5. Are we getting there?	Are we achieving the objectives determined in previous section? Are we achieving sales goals and ROI? How has consumer behavior shifted? Are changes required in our marketing mix?

Table 2 - JWT T Plan details

Even though I have been exposed to a variety of planning formats, I continually return to this approach. Most of what I learned then is still relevant today, especially from a planning process. New elements, though, have expanded the original scope of the approach. In particular, customer behavior has changed dramatically; consumers now assert a new level of independence and control over their brand relationships. Organizational culture was once not considered a significant element, but today, employee participation and commitment is critical to brand success. Media selection used to be limited, but communication channels have exploded, creating a new set of content formats and requirements. Measurement of

customer behavior was once limited and results lagged far behind shifts in the marketplace; analytics can now be collected in real time at any touchpoint and used to affect customer touchpoint behavior instantly.

On one hand, this new environment gives savvy brands the ability to capitalize on these opportunities. On the other hand, customers have evolved much faster than brands have in using technology to their advantage, a situation that has fundamentally changed the relationship between brand and customer. The customer has moved from being a passive recipient of whatever products were available to steering the entire process. If a brand does not meet the customers' precise needs or live up to any of its promises, it will be left behind.

The next sections will present the thinking from some of the pre-eminent brand strategists along with their contributions to the field of brand strategy. They each provide valuable insights and strategic elements which are still relevant today, even if their original intent has to be modified to fit the new dynamics of the marketplace.

4.2 Brand as identity system

David Aaker was the first to create a comprehensive brand system, which he called the Brand Identity Model. He described brand identity as:

"… a unique set of brand associations that the brand strategist aspires to create and maintain. These associations represent what the brand stands for and implies a promise to customers from the organization's members, Brand Identity should help establish a relationship between the brand and the customer by generating a value proposition involving functional, emotional or self-expressive benefits" (Aaker, 1996, p. 68).

At the center of Aaker's system is the Core Identity, a succinct, timeless identifier of the brand that remains constant despite whatever transpires in the marketplace. The Core Identity is built from four perspectives establishing the characteristics and attributes that define the brand identity. They include:

- Brand as product;
- Brand as organization;
- Brand as person; and
- Brand as symbol.

The substance of the four perspectives is based on the contribution from twelve dimensions. The figure below demonstrates how all the pieces work together to create Aaker's Brand Identity Model. Another important piece of Aaker's model is the Value Proposition. This combines the functional, emotional and self-expressive benefits of the brand into a

package that becomes the basis for communicating the brand's value to

the customer, with the goal of not only making a sale, but creating a longer

term relationship (Aaker, 1996).

Brand Identity Model

STRATEGIC BRAND ANALYSIS

Customer Analysis	Competitor Analysis	Self Analysis
• Trends	• Brand image/identity	• Existing brand image
• Motivation	• Strengths, strategies	• Brand heritage
• Unmet needs	• Vulnerabilities	• Strengths, strategies
• Segmentation	• Positioning	• Organization values

STRATEGIC IDENTITY SYSTEM

BRAND IDENTITY

Extended
Core
Brand
Essence

Brand as Product	Brand as Organization	Brand as Person	Brand as Symbol
1. Product scope	7. Organization attributes (e.g., innovation, consumer concern, trustworthy)	9. Personality e.g., genuine, energetic, rugged)	11. Visual image and metaphors
2. Product attributes			12. Brand heritage
3. Quality/Value		10. Customer/ brand relationships	
4. Uses			
5. Users	8. Local versus global		
6. Country of origin			

VALUE PROPOSITION

• Functional benefits	• Emotional benefits	• Self-expressive benefits

Credibility
Support other brands

RELATIONSHIP

BRAND IDENTITY IMPLEMENTATION SYSTEM

BRAND IDENTITY ELABORATION

BRAND POSITION
The part of the brand identity and value proposition that is to be actively communicated to the target audience   .

BRAND-BUILDING PROGRAMS

TRACKING

Kilde: Aaker, David A. & Hoachimsthaler: Brand Leadership. The Free Press. 2000.

Figure 5 - Aaker's Brand Identity Model

4.3 Brand as asset

If Aaker identified brand as being an interconnected system, Scott Davis took the concept in another, mutually supportive, direction. He characterized brand as an asset, albeit one that many companies were generating weak returns on. As Davis states:

"A consumer generally does not have a relationship with a product or a service, but he or she may have a relationship with a brand. In part, a brand is a set of promises. It implies trust, consistency and a defined set of expectations" (Davis S. , 2000, p. 3).

In essence, the brand occupies a piece of real estate in the customer's mind. That real estate can be worth a lot or not much, depending on its perceived value and relationship with the brand. Davis's research reflected the positive impact a brand could have on a customer's purchase behavior(Davis S. , 2000, pp. 5-6):

- 72 percent of customers will pay a 20 percent premium for their brand of choice; 50 percent will pay a 25 percent premium; and 40 percent will pay a 30 percent premium relative to the closest competitor.

- 25 percent of customers say that price does not matter if they are buying a brand that owns their loyalty.

- Over 70 percent of customers want the brand to guide their purchase decision.

- Peer recommendation influences almost 30 percent of all purchases. (This was before digital and social media became embedded in the decision-making process.)

- More than 50 percent of customers believe a strong brand enables more successful product introductions.

Davis' research provides a bellwether for the connected society we live in today. In particular, peer recommendation now crushes paid advertising. Instead of the brand dominant relationship that existed then, customers now assume the dominant position and directly influence how the brand behaves in the marketplace.

Davis's Brand Asset Management model consisted of five phases and eleven steps (Davis S. , 2000, p. 18).

Brand Asset Management Process

Phase 1 - Developing a brand vision

Step 1
Elements
of a brand
vision

Phase 2 - Determining BrandPicture

Step 2	Step 3	Step 4
Determining brand image	Creating brand contract	Brand-based customer model

Phase 3 - Developing a brand asset management strategy

Step 5	Step 6	Step 7	Step 8	Step 9
Positioning the brand	Extending the brand	Communicating brand's position	Leveraging the brand	Pricing the brand

Phase 4 - Supportng a brand management culture

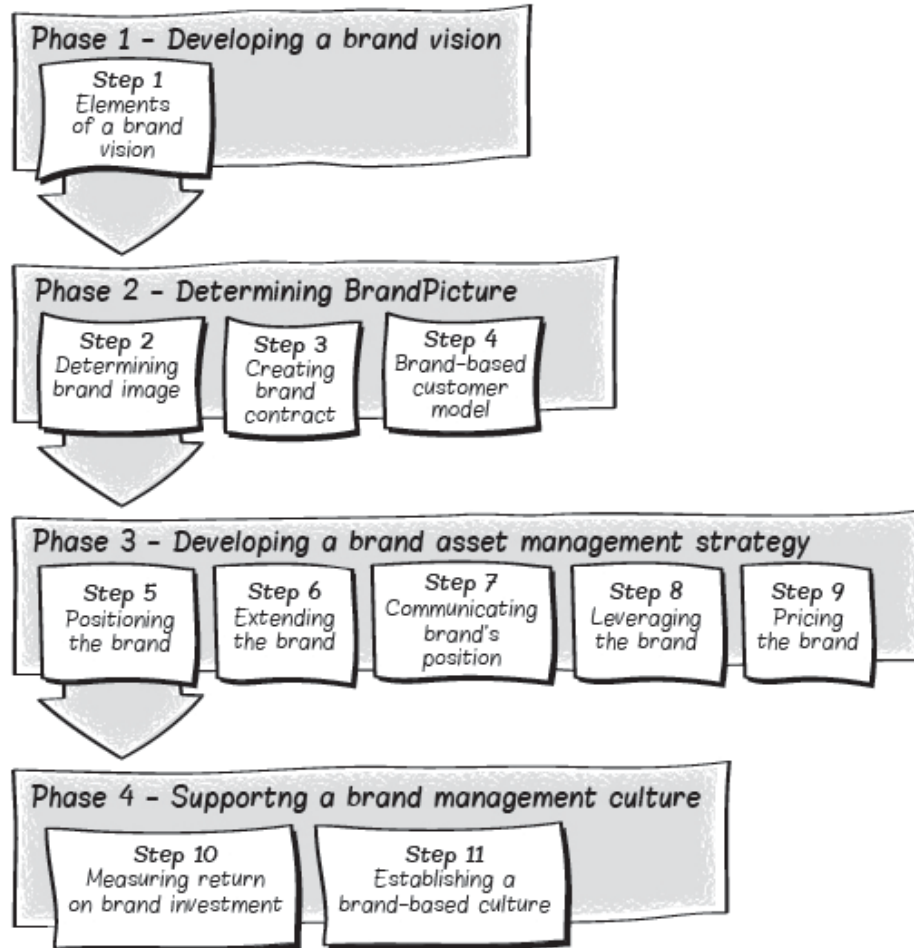| Step 10	Step 11
Measuring return on brand investment	Establishing a brand-based culture

Figure 6 - Davis' Brand Asset Management Model

There are a number of unique elements in Davis's model, and many which businesses still struggle with today. In areas such as customer centricity, touchpoint engagement, and metrics/analytics, though, the tools are much more accessible and affordable today than almost 20 years ago.

There are a number of elements to note in his model. Davis wanted Brand Vision closely linked to the corporate vision and the goals for the organization; brand was not just for the Marketing Department. His idea of a Brand Contract, which matched customer perceptions of the brand with the brand's promise(s), created a blueprint for the brand to follow in its pursuit of higher levels of purchase intent, customer satisfaction and loyalty. Although Customer Focus was not new, the Brand Asset Management model provided one of the first examples of mapping customer beliefs and behaviors during their purchase journey to brand engagement opportunities at every customer touchpoint.

Brand as an asset is gaining more traction today as valuation models improve, but the Return on Brand Investment proposed by Davis moved analysis away from awareness and recall metrics and into the realm of financially relevant outcome metrics in such areas as customer acquisition, sales, retention and loyalty.

The appeal of Davis's approach is the prospect of connecting the affective impact of a brand with quantitative, financial outcomes that define the brand's actual value to the business. This remains a weak spot today, but brand as an asset is becoming more of an acceptable balance sheet entry.

4.4 Brand as Energy

In 2007-2008, the "Great Recession" paralyzed organizations, economies and countries around the world. As organizations saw their valuations dramatically reduced, it brought into focus how much value brands contributed to their bottom lines. According to the Brand Asset Valuator (BAV), a research study developed by Young and Rubicam, brands were estimated to represent almost a third of a company's valuation (Gerzma, 2008, p. 31).

Of all the research vehicles in the market, BAV was unique. It had been introduced in 1993 with the goal of bringing robust and quantifiable measurement to brand value. To accomplish this goal, respondents would rate brands on 72 measures, after which their responses were compiled into a database for analysis. Since 1993, the study has grown to cover 200 categories and 3,000 brands.

BAV research findings were used to identify the drivers that lay beneath successful brands and how brand contributed to market and financial performance. The BAV model consisted of the following parts:
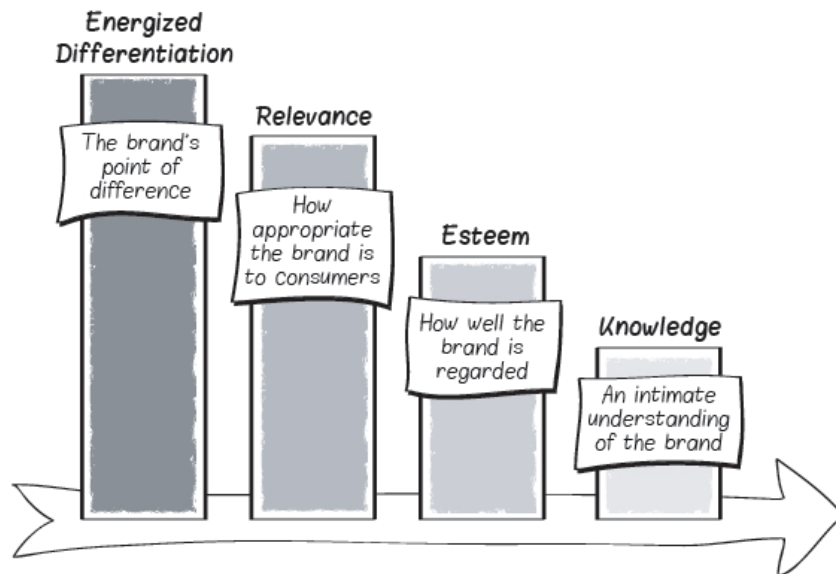
Brand Asset Valuator

Figure 7 - Gerzma's Brand Asset Valuator

Categories	Elements	Description
1. Brand Strength (Leading indicator of future growth value)	Energized Differentiation	Unique meaning of brand that is combined with motion/direction and influences margins and cultural currency.
	Relevance	How appropriate is the brand to the customer and how does that impact consideration and trial.
2. Brand Stature (Leading indicator of current operating value)	Esteem	How the customer perceives the brand in terms of quality and loyalty.
	Knowledge	This pertains to the intimate understanding and relationship the brand has with the customer (e.g. Apple, Patagonia, Red Bull). This is about awareness, and particularly, experience.

Table 3 - BAV details

One key finding was the concept of Energized Differentiation. Differentiation is a critical element of brand identity, and its usage has been a constant presence since the earliest products. But BAV research unearthed energy as a new kind of differentiation. Some brands possess this energy, and with it, a strong and loyal customer base.

According to Gerzma's analysis, this energy creates a constant state of customer interest in the activities of the brand. For example: Apple creates a high level of excitement and desire to purchase with every new product offering; Red Bull establishes strong relationships with extreme sports audiences through sponsorship and remarkable content; and Ikea seems to reinvent the living room every quarter. Because organizations like this consistently move forward in an interesting and dynamic manner, their energy generates an irresistible pull on customers, and as a consequence increases the brand's strength in terms of greater consideration, loyalty and pricing elasticity (Gerzma, 2008) among its customer base.

As brands struggle to make sense of today's dynamic marketplace, energy is important among not only customers, but employees as well. When an organization is not perceived to be moving forward, organizations become vulnerable (just ask the video store, taxi or travel agent industries). The idea of energized differentiation also highlights one of today's biggest

organizational pitfalls: customers will leave behind those brands that stick

with traditional thinking and business practices. They have higher

expectations of brands than the consumers of the past, and are looking for

a "return on their investment" (Gerzma, 2008, p. 57) in the forms of

enjoyment, social stature, appearance, knowledge, etc. When

organizations are unable to meet and sustain those expectations,

customers are more than ready to take their business elsewhere.

Gerzma recommends a five stage Energy Audit process to discover and

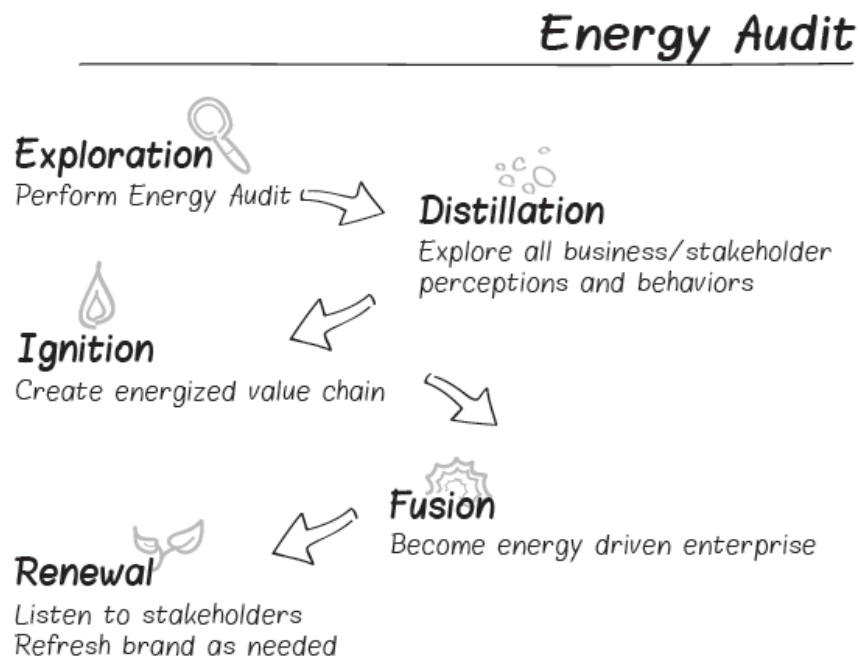operationalize energy differentiation:

Figure 8 - Energy Audit Process

Stage	Activities
1. Exploration	Perform the Energy Audit Explore all aspects of business model and stakeholder (internal and external) perceptions and behaviors
2. Distillation	Identify the Energy Core What do customers want to "invest" in, and how can insights about this be used to differentiate the brand?
3. Ignition	Create an energized value chain. An organization now needs to operationalize the Energy Core through all aspects of its business model.
4. Fusion	Become an energy-driven enterprise. The goal of this stage is to ensure that brand is endorsed and supported at the highest levels of the organization.
5. Renewal	Listen to stakeholders and refresh the brand as needed. The key is to be active in managing the evolution of the brand.

Table 4 - Energy Audit Details

Gerzma brings an interesting perspective to what makes Brands successful or unsuccessful. For years, he witnessed firsthand the ascendancy of customer power over brands through his use of the BAV research database. Enabled by digital and social media and broadband access, customers have been empowered to instantly and widely punish brands that do not live up to their values. Customer expectations are now very heavily affected by forces outside the brand's control, as people rely daily on friends, communities of interest, and third party reviewers to determine whether they should trust a brand.

BAV research demonstrated that brands could not dawdle or remain ambivalent while technology and customers move and think at an accelerating pace. As part of brand platform, energized differentiation has a number of merits. At a basic level, customers are going to be interested when something about a brand resonates with them. Energized differentiation invigorates customer engagement and experience, and brings with it a more future-oriented perspective. But for energized differentiation to be sustainable over time, it has to be embedded as a mode of practice in every aspect of the organization's culture.

4.5 Brand as Ideal

Can a business model succeed if it is built around an ideal? Jim Stengel, the former Chief Marketing Officer with Procter and Gamble, thought it was possible and set out to prove that companies that structure their customer promise around an ideal related to improving people's lives would outperform organizations that do not. In a ten year study that analyzed 50,000 brands around the world, he identified 50 companies whose brand ideals were linked with the goal of improving people's lives. The results were then tied back to financial results, and over the period surveyed, an investment in his Stengel Top 50 would have been 400% more profitable than the S&P 500 average return (Stengel, 2011, p. 1).

The importance of the brand in an organization's growth is demonstrated

by a profound shift in market capitalization. In 1980, a firm's market

capitalization consisted solely of tangible assets such as cash, equipment,

etc. Moving to 2010, it is estimated that tangible assets now make up 45%

of a firm's market capitalization. The remaining capitalization of the firm

comes from intangible assets, with about 30% of that attributed to brand.

This shift makes the brand potentially a firm's most significant single asset

(Stengel, 2011, p. 10). In short, any organization that ignores the power of

brand is neglecting a huge opportunity.

Returning to Stengel's theory, a brand ideal need not necessarily be about

altruism or corporate social responsibility; rather, it articulates a business's

fundamental reason for being and the directional catalyst for its growth

and sustainability. The power of an ideal is that it motivates internal and

external stakeholders in the pursuit and support of their mutual ideal. By

occupying a space in the minds and hearts of stakeholders, an ideal

establishes a sustainable point of differentiation against competitive

offerings. In an age where digital technology, globalization and demanding

customers have made traditional barriers to entry vulnerable, competitive

differentiation is extremely hard to find and maintain. From a competitor's

perspective, overcoming an ideal is a much more difficult proposition

(Stengel, 2011).

A brand ideal should by nature be authentic. If not steeped in true authenticity, a brand's shelf life is limited. The brand ideal provides multiple advantages, as it clarifies what an organization stands for, why it does what it does, and why it deserves customer commitment and loyalty. Another benefit of starting from an ideal is that ideals are not locked into a business model, and instead can provide motivation and guidance as a business adapts to new market dynamics. Furthermore, ideals can be transported across all parts of the business model, and act as a valuable connector among all employees and their departments (Stengel, 2011).

Through research, five Brand Ideals, which highlighted specific areas of human values, were identified (Stengel, 2011, pp. 37-39).

Ideal	Desired Result
1. Eliciting Joy	Activating experience of happiness, wonder and limitless possibility
2. Enabling Connection	Enhancing the ability of people to connect with one another and the world in meaningful ways
3. Inspiring Exploration	Helping people explore new horizons and new experiences
4. Evoking Pride	Giving people increased confidence, strength, security and vitality

5. Impacting Society	Affecting society broadly, including by challenging the status quo and redefining categories

Table 5 - Ideals Details

The identification of a brand's ideal originates from two sources. The first draws on the brand's heritage and the beliefs of the people inside the brand. The second revolves around the values the brand shares with its customers. To get there, the ideal can be identified and built using the following steps (Stengel, 2011, p. 54):

- **Discovering** or rediscovering a brand ideal in one of the five fields (see above) of human behaviors
- **Building** the culture around the ideals
- **Communicating** the ideals internal to engage employees and externally to engage customers
- **Delivering** the new-ideal customer experience
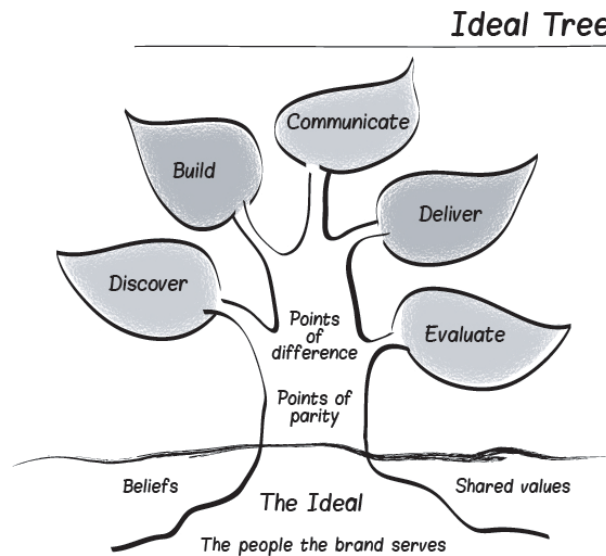- **Evaluating** business progress and people against the ideal

Figure 9 - Brand Ideals Tree

Stengel believes that brand is not just a product, it is a total experience. By focusing on providing ideal customer experiences, employees (e.g. those at Zappos) become energized and continually improve their performance or their role in growing the brand-customer relationship. An ideal acts as a guidance system that maintains consistency regardless of market, competition or customer shifts. The aspirational nature, or higher purpose, of an ideal offers an evolutionary path for the brand that can sync with the evolving needs of the customer. Ideals can also be "baked into" an organization's culture, so its value is evident and reinforced in every corner of the business. Gerzma wrote of the importance of organizational energy as an engine of differentiation. Ideals are ideally positioned to create that energy and drive differentiation in the customer's direction.

While Stengel does a good job of framing and supporting his ideals hypothesis, there are questions about his methodology. Shotton and O'Callaghan point out a number of issues (Shotton, 2015) in Stengel's research model. For one thing, they question the validity of the financial results in his findings. Although Stengel focused on single brands, some of his subjects were part of brand groups held in holding companies whose stock prices he used for the comparison. For example, Calvin Klein is positioned as a successful brand because of the ideals that drive its business, but Calvin Klein is part (43%) of PVH which also has Tommy Hilfiger, Speedo and Van Heusen contributing to the bottom line. Stengel used PVH's stock price in his data analysis.

Another issue is that he compared stock prices to the S&P 500 index, though some of the brands he studied did not trade on the NYSE, trading only on European and Asian exchanges, which cannot be directly equated with the S&P index.

They also took issue with the sustainability of ideal as Stengel defines it, because regardless of how strong an organization's ideal is, it is still vulnerable to marketplace disruptions (e.g. video stores, travel agents, book stores and taxi cabs). That said, there remains a lot of merit in

Stengel's model, in that it can add depth to the concept of "purpose" as a

guiding light for businesses, promoted by a variety of experts including

Collins and Porras in *Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary*

Companies (1996), and Joey Reiman in *The Story of Purpose* (2012).

4.6 Brand as Constraint

While brand as a function of constraint is not a formal theory, the thinking

around constraints is relevant to any organization, or individual for that

matter, today. Many organizations have a path-dependent approach to

how they run their business. Path dependence refers to how a company

functions from an organizational perspective. Over years, businesses

accrue such things as best practices, processes, hiring practices,

compensation standards or business planning. As a result, these

organizational capabilities, or ways of thinking, create an organizational

foundation that governs the beliefs and behaviors of the organization and

its stakeholders in a predetermined fashion. Because of past experiences,

the organization follows a predictable path that makes sense to them:

"We've always done it this way, it works" (Morgan, 2015).

In an environment where change is the new normal, the paradigm that has

served a company well in the past can become a future threat. Examples,

such as Expedia outflanking travel agents, Blockbuster losing to Netflix, or

microbreweries stealing significant market share from macro-breweries, demonstrate that highly entrenched organizations can have difficulty in addressing new threats. The foundations, and the built-in path dependencies, that created previous growth become constraints to future growth. Earlier in the paper, it was noted that the majority of CMOs were unprepared to deal with new market dynamics such as big data and social media and demonstrated that many organizations are still stuck in old paradigms, unable to adapt fast enough to the new realities.

However, Morgan believes constraints can also become engines of growth. His approach is encapsulated in the formulation of propelling questions:

> *"A propelling question is one that has both a bold ambition and a significant constraint linked together. It is called a propelling question because the presence of those two different elements together in the same question does not allow it to be answered in the same way we have answered previous questions; it propels us off the path on which we have become dependent"* (Morgan, 2015, p. 59).

An example of a question could be: *"How do we establish a stronger relationship with this buyer than the market leader, without a*

communications budget" (Morgan, 2015, p. 64). The intention of framing

questions in such a manner is to force people to look beyond their existing

path dependence for new solutions. Here are some other examples:

Chipotle: How can we offer a fast, cheap meal that is better quality and

healthier than other fast food chains?

Tesla: How can we build a car that is fast, fantastic looking, and one of the

safest on the road while being completely electric and environmentally

friendly?

Through his research, Morgan broke down the question format into two

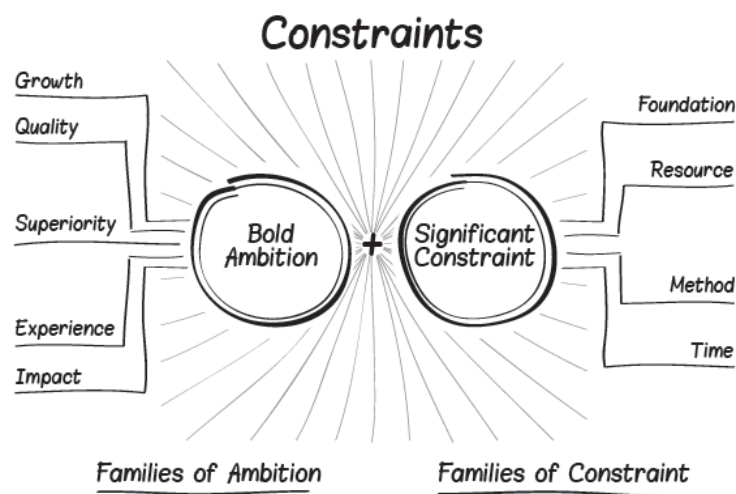families: one of ambition, and the other of constraint (Morgan, 2015, p.

69).

Figure 10 - Morgan's Constraints

This thinking is relevant to SMEs, because they are usually on the front line of their industry, without a lot of reaction time or resources to play with. At the same time, because of their smaller size and independence (no shareholders) they can pivot with more speed than bigger, more path-dependent organizations, and can be better prepared to deal with future shifts. To quote George Bernard Shaw:

> "The reasonable man adapts himself to the world, while the unreasonable man persists in adapting the world to himself…therefore all progress belongs to the unreasonable man" (Morgan, 2015)

4.7 Summary

Chapter 4 follows the evolution of brand planning models. There are two streams of thinking. The first stream consists of the JWT, Aaker, and Davis models, developed when brand was still in control of the customer relationship. Although there is a healthy dose of customer-centricity, they are relatively linear in terms of their systemic approach to brand building. These models are still viable in today's market, though they must be updated or adapted to reflect the new drivers. The second stream, Gerzma's, Stengel's and Morgan's models, are more in line with the massive changes that have swept, and continue to sweep, the

marketplace. Most of the sweeping comes from customers who have adapted and taken advantage of change. Driven by and utilizing new technologies, the customers have forced change upon organizations. This shift in the relationship has compelled adaptive organizations to rethink how they provide products and services and how they connect with their customers.

Where Aaker and Davis were more systems oriented, the newer models focus on intangible elements such as purpose, energized differentiation, and ideals. To support the brand model in this kind of environment, organizations need to be constantly engaged with their customers. Culture is critical in creating that level of engagement. Without a committed and collaborative employee base, chances of providing a meaningful and relevant customer experience are greatly reduced. This is especially true when successful customer interactions are coming down to managing the micro-moments/experiences.

One concept that straddles both schools of thought is that of purpose. The meaning has expanded over time, but purpose-led companies perform better than others. Not only does purpose reflect customer needs, it also provides a future-oriented engine for the business and acts as a key motivator and unifier for employees.

5.0 Today's brand – between a rock and a digital place

Today's brand challenges

Businesses, whether large enterprises or SMEs, and by association their brands, face an unrelenting stream of challenges to their profitability and survivability. But those who can adjust and adapt to the new realities have access to many opportunities. In the following sections, some of the key challenges will be discussed.

5.1 Marketing communications

Not surprisingly, the nature and benefits of marketing communications has changed. Traditional advertising and marketing relied on macro-moments to build their brands. Consider that on April 9, 1979, All in the Family, the iconic TV sitcom, drew over 40 million U.S. viewers from a U.S. population of 225.10 million. Compare that to April 9, 2012, when the combined top five networks drew an audience of 29.7 million viewers from a population of 314.10 million (Garfield, 2013, p. 24). Now, marketers are talking about connecting to customers in real time in what GE calls micro-experiences which are personalized, customized and impactful. For GE, the next stage of the challenge is to collect all this micro-data from the customer experience into micro-relevance that then converts it into insights that

creates macro-impact (Precourt, 2015). While technology has enabled businesses to connect at diverse touchpoints with incredible frequency, it has also created such tactics as targeted, programmatic media buys which stalk customers through the purchase journey, even if they do not want it. For advertisers, the result is that marketing communications becomes a weakened tactical force, and even weaker as the number of messages increase and customers go to great lengths to block them out.

5.2 Technology

Technology is the key driver behind the transformation of the marketplace. Brands now encounter multiple digital challenges, whether in development or content in mobile, web, social, applications, platforms, networks and bandwidth, all of which have altered the face and pace of business. With these advances, the speed of business has to keep up with customers who wants their needs met right now, at the right price, in the right place, and all within the context of a seamless and easy purchase experience.

5.3 Social Media

Social media leveled the playing field across the globe. In this environment, customers control the brand story of narrative and are more likely to use their own personal networks (e.g. Facebook, LinkedIn) to both form and communicate their brand perceptions, and seek the opinions of

third parties (e.g. TripAdvisor, Yelp). For brands, social media is an enormous word-of-mouth broadcasting system, wherein lack of transparency or consistency can cause substantive damage to the brand and its position in the marketplace.

5.4 Big Data

Big Data provides unparalleled knowledge about customer behavior, but as noted earlier in the IBM CMO Study, many marketers are not prepared to take advantage of Big Data's potential benefits. Beyond the investment required, integrating different data sources and transforming data into actionable insights are problematic for most potential users.

Big Data is rightfully considered to be one of the greatest additions to a marketer's toolbox since the printing press. But there are limitations. Research conducted by the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising (IPA) out of the United Kingdom entitled: *"The Long and Short of it"* examined results from over 1,000 advertising/marketing effectiveness case studies to understand how business success is achieved (Binet, 2013). Not surprisingly, Internet usage in the case studies had grown dramatically from eight per cent in 1998, to 86 per cent in 2012. The results offer a cautionary note on the impact and effectiveness of digital/online channels combined with Big Data to drive short term sales growth on a consistent

basis. These activities rely on dynamic and promotional pricing strategies to incentify sales, and the research reveals that reliance on this strategic approach eventually loses strength and does not build long term customer preference or loyalty, because price becomes the primary determinant of purchase, and positive outcomes can plateau after about six months. While building brand equity and establishing deeper customer relationships takes longer, these activities are more memorable and build customer preference and loyalty for the longer term. When this base is established, it enhances the impact of the shorter term price driven, transactional programs. The key is to combine both strategies. Research indicated that a mix of 60% brand building, to build long term preferences, and 40% promotional activities, to create immediate sales, was an optimal balance (Binet, 2013).

5.5 Globalization

Local and national competitive advantage has been weakened with the advent of globalization. Competition now can come from anywhere, and cost advantages are almost impossible to maintain, as demonstrated by the decline in North American manufacturing. On the positive side of globalization, access to international markets has never been easier, although many countries still take a variety of actions to protect homegrown manufacturers.

5.6 Customer Purchase Behavior

Customer purchase behavior has undergone a seismic shift. In traditional marketing environments, the path to purchase resembled a funnel. The basic idea was that potential customers entered the top of the funnel with a prioritized selection of brands in mind, and went through a variety of stages (e.g. AIDA – Awareness, Interest, Desire, Action) in which they gradually narrowed down their options, until emerging at the end having chosen one product from one brand.

Purchasing behavior has changed, so that the metaphor of a journey is a better descriptor than that of a funnel. The Customer Purchase Journey was the output from a McKinsey global research study (Court, 2009). The journey starts with a customer who has a pre-existing selection of brands in mind. The mental list has accumulated over time, deriving from exposure to advertising, conversations with friends, family, communities of interest, and/or third party reviewers/ experts. When motivated to make a purchase, the customer enters Stage One, Initial Consideration Set, with their pre-determined set of brands. They then move through Stage Two, Active Evaluation, where they do research that may lead them to add additional brands or remove pre-existing brands from their list (the funnel metaphor presumes a stable list of options). Stage Three is the Moment of

Purchase, when they buy the product. In Stage Four, the Post-Purchase

Experience, is when they try the product. Providing they have a good

experience, they move into the Loyalty Loop, where they have the

potential to become one of the valuable and elusive Brand Advocates.

Brand advocates are extremely important, because when they share their

experience with other potential customers within their network, their word,

as a trusted source, carries powerful influence over their connections'

buying choices (Court, 2009).

The Moment of Purchase deserves some attention. P&G developed the

precursor to this concept. In 2005, they implemented marketing programs

around the First Moment of Truth (FMOT) and the Second Moment of

Truth (SMOT). FMOT was when the customer selected and purchased a

product, and SMOT was the customer's experience when they first tried it.

P&G believed that if they controlled both of those moments, they could

create loyal customers. Google added the concept of a Zero Moment of

Truth (ZMOT), which identifies the very beginning of the customer journey

and is the first contact the customer has with a brand. It occurs when a

customer first starts thinking of a product or service, and goes on line to

connect with the brands already in their mind. First impressions are

important, and the ZMOT is critical in their decision-making process.

Making a good first impression helps the brand remain a contender for the

rest of the evaluation process (Wikipedia, 2016).

Customer Purchase Journey
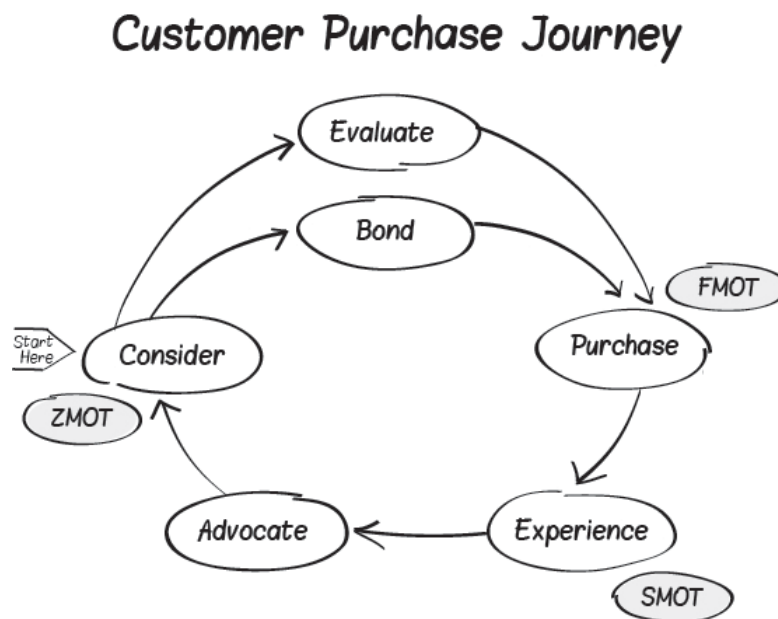
Figure 11 - Mckinsey Customer Purchase Journey

Two-thirds of touchpoints used by customers today are customer driven

(e.g. friends, Internet reviews, store visits), while brand-driven

communications represent only in one-third of their touchpoints (Court,

2009). This is a major challenge for brands to address; the content

implications are daunting. Marketers need to understand customer

touchpoint behaviors, and develop timely, relevant and tailored content for

customer needs at every one.

5.7 Organizational Culture

Peter Drucker coined the phrase "Culture eats strategy for breakfast." Nowhere is his pronouncement more important than in the creation of a strong, sustainable brand. As experience has become one of few remaining differentiators for a business, success is predicated on supportive employees who share the same values and exhibit the same behaviors across the organization. Brands supply a unifying code or purpose that govern, support and guide employee actions as they go about fulfilling the organization's promise to customers.

Culture also plays an important role in business strategy and, by association, brand strategy. Traditional strategy development happened in the c-suite far from the maddening crowd. Mintzburg's depiction of strategy in the real world demonstrates this approach's inherent problems. The c-suite-created Intended Strategy leaves the corner office and is introduced to the marketplace, where things start to happen. Some activities are eliminated in response to marketplace realities and re-classified as Unrealized Strategy. What remains of the original strategy evolves into the Deliberate Strategy which moves forward until new factors, as captured in the Emergent Strategy, mesh with what remains of the original plan. The final form is called the Realized Strategy (Mintzburg, 1998).

In a top-down organizational culture, adapting to dynamic change can be very difficult. In a flatter corporate culture, where employees can communicate their experiences with customers and influence the process, the trends and drivers that exist between them and the customers can be captured and incorporated into strategy and brand planning. Such organizations, with highly engaged employees, are more likely to have the agility needed to thrive in today's rapidly evolving environment. Brand, its purpose and how its values and beliefs are operationalized in employees and capabilities, plays a critical and positive role in creating the conditions for this to happen.

6.0 What do the experts say about brands?

In the previous sections, the discussion of brand was based on existing literature that captured brand thinking over more than three decades. The objective was to understand and document core concepts, building blocks and the nature of brand-customer relationships.

Section 6.0 explores the current state of branding through the eyes and experience of brand experts, culling from a series of interviews conducted for this project. The goal is to understand how old and new brand concepts perform in the marketplace. All interviewees possess extensive experience

in the development of brands across a wide selection of public and private organizations. They include CEOs (advertising/marketing communications, digital agency), CMOs (consumer packaged goods, media, beer), CCOs (Chief Creative Officers), and consultants.

The Discussion Guide (Appendix A) was primarily focused on three subjects:

- What are the current trends in brand development?
- What does the future hold for brands?
- How do SMEs see their brand?

The brand experts' thinking about these questions coalesces around a number of contexts affecting the current state of brand thinking. They include:

- Confusion of what a brand actually is
- Shifts in brand strategy
- New dynamics in brand-customer relationships
- Technology's impact on brands
- Brand as inspiration, purpose, ideal

The brand experts interviewed are herein identified as follows:

Code	Description
BE1	Chief Creative Officer in multiple multinational agencies
BE2	Founder, VP Design in global design firm

BE3	Director, Brand Citizenship, CEO of non-profit
BE4	CEO, Canadian and U.S. advertising agencies
BE5	Consultant, author, CMO in large media and alcohol businesses
BE6	Senior Brand Consultant
BE7	CEO, founder of multiple ad agencies
BE8	Consultant, author, founder of multiple high end design firms
BE9	Former agency CEO, marketing academic, author, consultant

Table 6 - Brand expert profiles

6.1 What is a brand?

Among all respondents, there was agreement that when they worked with a client, and especially with executives in the c-suite, brand was not well understood. Some respondents talked of avoiding the "B" word in presentations.

> *"There is vast confusion around branding and brand. Branding to me is how you bring the brand to life, more about the tactical expression of what the brand is. It's really important for SMEs to figure out what their brand is" (BE4, 2015).*

> *"People have lost sight of what a brand is and confuse it with marketing; brand is an asset and marketing is a cost" (BE5, 2015).*

Part of a brand's value is its ability to unite the organization around a common set of beliefs, but many organizations lack that cohesion at the

executive level, and, in these experts' opinions, are not comfortable discussing brand at all.

> *"Brand exercises or sessions are really interesting, because you find out pretty quickly that there are a variety of different strategic perspectives; there is not alignment. Even if you're not advertising, you still have a brand, and the sessions reveal the lack of alignment"* (BE1, 2015).

> *"We can't call it branding, because everyone thinks it's a waste of money, we like to call it corporate positioning…there's all sorts of code words for it"* (BE2, 2015).

One factor in this dearth of brand knowledge was the lack of experience among clients and some brand strategy providers. One interviewee attributed the lack of knowledge to the actions of Consumer Packaged Goods (CPG) firms. As early proponents of branding, CPG firms had strong training programs which not only trained employees in the required disciplines, but also acted as a catalyst for training among their partners such as ad agencies. But as American CPG firms consolidated many functions, including marketing, back to their U.S. head offices, that talent pipeline dried up.

"In terms of trends, the ability to articulate and champion brands in Canada has diminished. This is partially due to the fact that CPG companies, who instituted and taught branding practices, have for the most part, repatriated all their marketing to the US" (BE4, 2015).

While brand development may lack experienced practitioners, it is an omnipresent element of today's business environment and culture. The result is twofold: many organizations are realizing that brand should be an integral part of their organization, and there are also a lot of brands out there that suffer from lack of intent and substance.

"I've observed that organizations that didn't think branding was that important or relevant are now very interested, whether in the private or public sectors: professional services, healthcare, business to business. Branding is not just the territory of consumer brands, and these are the organizations that need a better way of engaging" (BE6, 2015).

"The only other thing that has changed is that everyone is a brand. Branding is now ubiquitous across all categories" (BE7, 2015).

All the respondents noted that once they were able to properly frame the value a brand could bring to their business, they were able to overcome obstructions. But even with conceptual buy-in, short-term needs could easily derail the budget and sustained support for brand development.

"Once you sit down and get into the notion of consistently communicating to your audiences and understanding who your audiences are, how you fit in the competitive set and how you're different, it's not that esoteric of an idea" (BE2, 2015).

The interviewees expressed a general belief that traditional marketing and brand strategy fundamentals were still valid and valuable as planning tools. Changes were most evident in the new channels for brand communications to all its stakeholders. Top of the list was digital platforms, mobile and social media; generally, the interconnectedness of everyone.

"It's all about the delivery. We know people are just as loyal or disloyal to brands as they ever were. The fundamental value that brands provide to people has not changed. It's a short hand for them; it's a signal of consistent quality" (BE7, 2015).

But, while fundamentals remain a good starting point, brands need to be layered with new elements that reflect new organizational, customer and competitive requirements. Some of the respondents identified brands as systems which existed in more complex ecosystems, and said that to succeed in this more complex environment, brands need to expand their connectivity to the new actors in the system.

"I think there are 4 new "Ps" for brands, and they are people, intellectual property, process and partnership, with profitability in the middle and the customer all around it" (BE5, 2015).

"I used to think of a brand as a promise for which there is no acceptable substitute. Something that was so insulated from the competition that people would irrationally purchase it. It generally meant it was about messaging. Brands needed to understand who they are and communicate it. Today, it is a collection of actions that, when taken together, define a club to which people want to belong. Community is open, where as a club has admission requirements. Not necessarily exclusive, but you have to do something or have a passion about something that exceeds the community norm" (BE9, 2015) .

Another trend affecting brand is the democratization of production

capabilities. For anyone wanting to produce any kind of media, there is a

wide array of high-quality, cost-efficient options. For example, a really

good HD video camera with filters can cost less than $5,000. To complete

the production suite, top-end video editing software can be purchased for

less than $1,000. Computer and memory costs are down dramatically, and

distribution is virtually free. It is no longer a novelty to see YouTube

sensations move from their bedroom to the mainstream, complete with

corporate sponsorship.

6.2 Brand strategy

In an environment with so many moving parts and actors, strategy

development is problematic. It is especially difficult for an executive cohort

that still uses dated planning methods better suited to a more predictable

environment. Planning horizons are much shorter in today's marketplace,

and with that in mind, successful brands and business strategies, must be

adaptive, flexible and fluid.

A look at how CMOs across the globe are adjusting to tectonic shifts in

their respective businesses can put this planning disconnect into

perspective. In an IBM study of over 1,700 CMOs (IBM Institute for

Business Value, 2011), research subjects talked about what keeps them

up at night, and apparently they are not getting much sleep. Seventy-nine percent of those surveyed expected a high/very high level of complexity over the next five years, yet only 48 percent felt prepared for the level of complexity that awaits them. Breaking it down into to specific areas of unpreparedness, the top four sources of discomfort were as follows:

Market Factors	Percent Unprepared
Data explosion	71
Social Media	68
Growth of channel and device choices	65
Shifting consumer demographics	63

Table 7 - IBM CMO Study

The only market factors for which fewer than 50 percent felt unprepared were Regulatory Considerations and Corporate Transparency (IBM Institute for Business Value, 2011).

The results of this study indicated that standard business planning tools taught in MBA programs, and still often used as the basis for planning, are not equipping CMOs to deal with the complexity organizations face today. Many business programs have adjusted their strategy courses (e.g. Rotman and Design Thinking), but senior management in most firms come from an earlier time and strategy perspective; it will take time for the new crop of MBAs to make it to the c-suite.

Having a brand can provide a solution to the complexity challenge. It can

be what some call a "north star" for businesses in that it sheds its

constant, guiding light regardless of the challenges. the brand can serve

as a focal point for a business' ecosystem, offering both discipline and

adaptability at all levels of the organization.

"Brands aren't marketing, brands are about systems – from

operations, to sales; legal to marketing to customer service" (BE7,

2015).

"Branding's – using the iceberg analogy – value is not about what

you're spending on making the promise and using marketing

promoting the message, which is above the waterline. It's about the

systems below the waterline and how well they support the system

that exists above the waterline" (BE5, 2015).

"If the brand is the attractor, who does it attract? Are they people that

are going to act as advocates, the kind of partnerships you develop,

the interdependencies you develop? You have to understand your

interdependencies. You don't exist in a vacuum; you exist in an

ecosystem, and if you don't understand the dynamics of the

ecosystem and where you play there, especially as a small business,

you're toast" (BE8, 2015).

"Brand exists within the context of three C's: Commerce is the

business piece. Culture is the internal piece, which is as true for

small business as big business: a great sense of internal, purpose-

driven organization. The Community piece is how you're building a

community around what your brand stands for. Is it a community of

interest or local values? These are very practical things" (BE8, 2015).

One of a brand's benefits, from a systems perspective, is that it reinforces

organizational values and beliefs at every stakeholder touchpoint. That

elevates it from being associated with an advertising message to being an

integral part of the customer experience, where one of the last remaining

sources of differentiation and customer preference exists.

"What obviously has changed is the delivery of experience with the

brand in terms of the communications aspect. Communications is a

weak force in branding, not a strong force. Everybody has always

over-emphasized the role of communications in building strong

brands relative to the strength of experience" (BE7, 2015).

"In an age where a brand proposition is easy to match, the emotional

content and the experience content are the two major drivers. It's

about the experience people have dealing with the brand" (BE7,

2015).

6.3 Brand customer relationship

Like organizations, customers live in complex times. When making a

purchase, they face a sea of choices and a tsunami of information as they

go through their decision-making process. Their preferred information

comes from many sources, with traditional marketing communications

vehicles far down the list. Customers are much more likely to rely on

friends, their extended network and third party recommenders than a

brand's own marketing platforms. But authentic branded content still has

an important role to play, if they get it right.

"For audiences, it is getting much more difficult to choose because of

the fragmentation of everything. Brand becomes a powerful decision-

making short cut, but for it to work it has to be authentic…if you are

superficial or don't deliver on your promise, the relationship is over"

(BE6, 2015).

"People are looking for trust first and foremost. Nobody trusts anything anymore. They don't trust government, media or any other interactions. People aren't as naive anymore; people are much more cynical. Whatever you're going to say, there has to be substance" (BE2, 2015).

"The onus is on brands to engage, because with the millennial generation, there is no other way. You have to be really clear about your purpose – every ecosystem in nature is very clear about their purpose, they're not fumbling around. Nobody gets to survive unless they're creating value" (BE8, 2015).

Customer engagement is at the top of every brand's to-do list, but how each one strives to engage is another matter altogether. Providing value to customers in a way that helps them (and their friends) trust the brand and include it as part of their decision-making is a difficult task. Especially when brand engagement takes place in numerous channels and on multiple devices, ranging from mobile to in-store. For brands, that means not only do they have to be available at every touchpoint, but at every touchpoint, they have to provide content that is valuable, timely, shareable, high quality, and consistent with brand values.

"People have always worked in systems, but up until recently, the

system has been more hierarchical and mechanical. Now systems

are much more fluid. You have to build brands through engaging

community. These days you can't just build it and sell it. That's the

way we thought about – just like Ries and Trout told us to do it; build

it and pound it out there" (BE8, 2015).

6.4 Brand and technology

Technology has changed the face of brands (along with just about

everything else). In some ways it is a great enabler, in other ways it has

made brands extremely vulnerable to forces beyond their control.

"Technology is driving things on this continuum of time in being faster

and faster, whereas great brands and their values exist on a

continuum of timelessness where the values they stand for are not

moving forward" (BE1, 2015).

Nowhere is this more self-evident than in social media, where any

transgression or breach in authenticity by an organization can be quickly

amplified. It assigns a high cost to being opaque or inauthentic, because

the opportunity for forgiveness is limited. The negative exposure of VW

and how their green accountability claims were a function of premeditated

software fraud shows how deep the pain can be. VW's share price tumbled by 30%. BrandFinance estimated VW's brand value beforehand to be $31 Billion U.S. Since their violation of the Clean Air Act, their brand valuation dropped by $10 Billion U.S. (BrandFinance, 2015).

> "The big change is the social media aspect…for all kinds of stakeholders to have a conversation or an attack or a flaming; to do that instantly and widely has really sharpened the focus of every organization…to be aware that everything they do can affect their reputation, and there's little you can do about it. It really ups the ante on walking the talk. You can't get away with saying one thing and doing the other, because you will be called out on it; it's a huge reputational risk and it affects everyone" (BE2, 2015).

> "The latest iteration of brand is based on the reality that you are two or three clicks away from being busted from telling a lie or pissing someone off. I think it's a good thing, by the way. Brands are now being forced to tell authentic stories. You could have gotten away with it during the 70s and 80s. Target was a prime example of how to screw it up, and will probably be a business case for the next 100 years on how not to do it. Authenticity has become the new black" (BE1, 2015).

6.5 Brand and purpose

Some brands are moving towards identities that are more purposeful, authentic and inspirational as a way to build sustainable differentiation into their business. But success depends on how their values and beliefs resonate with employees, customers and partners. If a partner in an organization's value chain acts at odds against its brand purpose, customers will connect the partner's actions to the brand. When Joe Fresh and other clothing manufacturers were connected to their manufacturing partner in Bangladesh, whose factory collapsed with great loss of life, they faced backlash over working conditions, pay and child labor.

> "This purpose-based branding of the not-for-profit is seeping back into the consumer space as even big CPCs such as Johnson and Johnson or P&G start applying more purposeful messaging around their product stories – they're all trying to make the world a better place" (BE6, 2015).

One of the more interesting interviewees was with an agency out of California. They had established a practice within their organization called Brand Citizenship, which sought out opportunities for their clients that went beyond the usual parameters of a CSR program.

"It's not about being a nice company or a good person, it's about going deeper with your customers with what you both believe in" (BE3, 2015).

"We have three filters, an idea that matters in culture or society, a brand that logically connects, and high levels of consumer engagement" (BE3, 2015).

"It's not about giving just money to a non-profit, that's about five to ten years old. The idea of a brand putting their logo on the non-profit or, vice versa, the non-profit putting their logo on the brand. I think what it's truly about is taking a stand on something that consumers instantly understand, and understand because it relates to the company and its product and services. The brand basically goes deeper" (BE3, 2015).

To put that ad agency's thinking in context, the respondent described a program with Google. The challenge was to get more female programmers. Statistics showed that only 1% of grade-school girls were interested in computer science studies. The solution was to develop a

program inviting young girls to create light designs for the 56 trees (with LED lights) that were to be lit up at the White House as part of its Christmas celebrations. After two weeks, they had over 600,000 entries of LED-design codes from girls, plus the partnership of both OBATas and Tom Hanks.

> "We were working with and doing these big ad campaigns with these big brands like Google and Samsung, and it seemed logical that they would want to extend those campaigns into more meaningful stances, especially since every stat about Millennials and Gen Z that comes up is dripping with purpose. There's enough hard economic data, and companies out there that are proving the economic viability" (BE3, 2015).

One takeaway from the interview was that the purpose-driven initiatives were not losing propositions from a financial perspective; there was a positive ROI, even if it took time to show up on the bottom line. Another outcome was that the programs served as strong motivating forces among employees.

> "Employees adore it. One of the biggest problems for companies is getting and retaining employee talent. In 2015, Millennials became

the largest portion of the workforce. Millennials are very aspirational and purpose driven, and we come in to Google and work with them on programs; people absolutely love it. Everyone loves it" (BE3, 2015).

6.6 Brand and culture

In every conversation with brand experts and SMEs, it was reinforced that if a brand did not have buy-in and support from employees, it was destined to fail. The other point made consistently was that brand as a driver of culture is one of the few differentiators left for organizations. But it is also a driver that is not obvious in the world of short term results.

> "Our belief is that you need to create messaging platforms in the company that are as true and motivating to internal stakeholders as they are to external stakeholders. Some marketers just want to check off the fourteen things on their list instead of creating work that make us proud and reflect our corporate values" (BE1, 2015).

> "Culture is a byproduct of what the leaders want, if it's not consistent with the brand, then you've got a problem. We do research to see if the culture is aligned with the brand; if the employees aren't on board the brand proposition, then you've got a big problem. Culture is a big

enabler of the brand, and it's all the stuff that is below the waterline that is within the company. The culture then becomes highly reflective of the brand, which is then translated into proof points at the point of customer interaction to promote the values that drive the brand" (BE5, 2015).

"Real brand is deep, and it's slow and it never ends – you can be brilliant one day, and a goat the next. Some organizations do really deep work, but it is only visible in the subtlest way to external audiences. Does every employee in the organization have a line of sight to what generates value? That's what I consider a great brand. Nobody has a sustainable competitive advantage anymore. Brand is so deep and below the surface" (BE6, 2015).

"What has changed is that the force of marketing communications is getting even weaker and is going to kill advertising, and that is because we are in a service economy. The place you first start executing your brand is with your employees. Unless your employees understand what your brand platform is, what your core values are, and live that brand identity to the customers, you don't understand where contemporary branding is" (BE7, 2015).

6.7 Brand as futures

In the future, brands will be busy. In addition to the fundamental need of providing a profitable product or service, they will need new ways to create a sustainable enterprise. As mentioned, brands will be asked to fulfill a more inspirational role in the lives of customers and employees in the form of purpose, ideals, values and the "Why," or vision, behind what the organization does. Vision by nature is future-oriented, and brand, as part of vision, was described in both relevant literature and these interviews as a guide along the way to the future. The term was used in the context of decision-making under new business conditions, though more in a responsive than anticipatory mode. Foresighting, the art/science of understanding or anticipating future trends, was not mentioned by the brand researchers or the experts interviewed as a component of brand development. As brand differentiation increasingly depends on softer values linked to customer behaviors and beliefs, anticipating future customer behaviors and needs would likely be a valuable organizational capability. Strategic foresight would be a valuable tool in meeting the goal of assuring the future viability of one's business.

> "Brands that will survive will be that ones that inspire customers by telling them why they do what they do instead of what they do. I think

people are going to seek out authentic experiences more and more"
(BE1, 2015).

"New P on the horizon – premium brand values; a strong brand
justifies a premium product. I just don't mean price, it's the
inspirational nature of the premium brands. Determine that your
competencies are executed at a premium level" (BE5, 2015).

We're in apps now, but what is the next phase that will help people
have a better life? How can a brand play a more practical role? How
can it take the abstract of ideals and translate it into a meaningful
experience that will touch people with some frequency? It is most
useful if it is embedded in the experience" (BE9, 2015).

"Brands will become more important assets. An international financial
institution incorporates brand strength into their portfolio. As analytics
continue to improve, there will be a more finite and visible definition
of brand value, and that will have more visibility in the c-suite" (BE6,
2015).

Organizational brand values can extend from running of the business into
the area of social responsibility. Patagonia is one such firm. They are a

certified B Corporation, yet engage in activities such as recycling plastic bottles to manufacture their fleece products. They have a $20 million budget to back "green" start-ups, and on Black Friday, they ran a campaign that advised customers not to buy new jackets, providing a series of tips on how to repair their existing ones (Whiteside, 2015). It is worth noting that Patagonia is a privately held company, which allows them more flexibility and freedom to stay true to their brand and its values versus a publicly traded company where investor satisfaction (stock value and/or dividends) is the first responsibility.

"From a brand point of view, you've got to be socially responsible. It's going to be a big thing. That will be the expectation of brands, and not in the way that, you've planted a tree. It's more along: we have this many people employed in this country and we pay more than minimum wage, and they pay your taxes. Being a good corporate citizen is important" (BE3, 2015).

"We're entering a kind of post-globalization era where the backlash has been growing against corporations and brands, and it is the responsibility of businesses in any country to support the growth and welfare of that country, because if you ship out all the jobs, you're left

with a domestic market that can't afford your product. Plus, you have all the new social costs if government can't afford it" (BE2, 2015).

Some predicted a darker future for brands, in which practitioners abandon brand principles and go to market with only a short-term, tactical perspective.

"My fear is that less and less people are going to be any good at it. It might be my bias, but it seems that there is a need to complicate it. Brands will get left behind in favour of tactics. Because of fragmentation, it's way more complicated, and people get overwhelmed by the options versus understanding what our true north is, and translating that into reaching our core audiences. I don't see these great brand visionaries anymore. Where is the intelligentsia going to come from? People aren't being trained anymore. People are enamoured with branding, not brand" (BE4, 2015).

"The frequency of brand messages will continue to increase, which will make the force of communications even weaker. But for brands to become stronger, more focus on customer experience is a necessity. Modern communications mean you have to meet people

in the home, in the store and on the street. We're in a world of "Don't tell me, show me." Sampling and things like that have become much more important" (BE7, 2015).

Also anticipated is an increase in customer co-design of products and services. One of the interviewees provided an interesting example. An American dairy created an online co-op for their customers and gave them privileges such as voting rights on company and product decisions, access to board meetings and materials, and even let them name their cows. They anticipated 20,000 members, yet at the time of our conversation, they had 80,000 members. Not only were customers heavily engaged with the company, but after 100 years in existence, they recorded their most profitable year ever, and their ice cream had taken over the number one position in their home state.

> "Customer experience with the brand will increase. Engaging the customer in co-design with the brand is not a new concept, B to B brands have done for it years. An airplane manufacturer will sit down with the customer to build what they need" (BE7, 2015).

6.8 SMEs and brand

Most interviewees had experience working with SMEs and provided a variety of comments.

Because of their smaller scale, SMEs have the ability to get their brand efforts up to speed much faster than a multi-national corporation.

> "I think brand transfers better and faster to SMEs than global brands. If you're a global brand, you have decades, maybe even centuries, of institutional learning, perspectives and biases. If it is relatively new, for a global brand it means massive change. Very few global brands can shift at global scale. Maybe Unilever. But if you're a smaller company, you're literally setting the culture and hiring people, and that's the time when customers understand who you are' (BE3, 2015).

In contrast, their entrepreneurial attitude would demand results in the short-term. With brands needing a longer-term effort, that means efforts have to match the speed of their businesses. It is important to look for short-term, tangible wins.

"Because SMEs are entrepreneurs, they want to try new things, and if it doesn't work right away, they want to move on. You've got to stick with it" (BE4, 2015).

"There are interesting patterns – much more focus on families, because many are family held. So they're representing their family reputation. Those are the values. Consumer Packaged Goods constructs do not track well" (BE7, 2015).

For SMEs, simplicity is key. For many brand strategy or design firms, creating brand complexity seems to be standard operating procedure. One idea that emerged from several sources (literature survey and one interviewee) was the concept of a Minimal Viable Brand (MVB), which is the idea that you get the basics down, expose it to internal and external stakeholders, and evaluate the results. Once the core elements and values are validated, the business can expand its brand into other facets of the organization.

"…Many layers have obscured what the real essence of the brand is" (BE6, 2015).

7.0 What do SMEs think about brands?

SME leaders from diverse businesses such as video production, software, aerospace, manufacturing, healthcare and pharmaceutical firms, who were interviewed for this project, embraced fundamental brand- building activities, but did not recognize them as brand activities. This perspective was shaped by their belief that brand was about logos, taglines, color choices and really bad mission statements. They did not see these elements as important contributors to their business velocity, profitability or meeting customer needs. The contradiction was that they were embracing initiatives that could be considered strong branding elements. They highlighted the following:

- Senior leadership of brand activities

- Customer experience/engagement

- Employee involvement

- Excellence in product/service delivery

SME Interviewees are herein identified as follows:

SME1	VP Marketing, Health Care Software (120 employees)
SME2	CEO, Manufacturing Business (50 Employees)
SME3	CEO, Video Production Company (20 Employees)
SME4	CEO, Technology Start-up (6 employees)
SME5	CEO, Aerospace Manufacturer (70 employees) (SME5, 2015)
SME6	VP Marketing, Pharmaceutical Company

Table 8 - SME profiles

7.1 Senior leadership of brand activities

In all organizations, brand (not necessarily called brand) was driven from the top and considered a critical element of their value proposition. The primary challenge against the use of brand appears to be more semantic than philosophical in nature. In the interviews, respondents would relegate brand to a low level of importance, and then describe an important "non-brand" activity (e.g. organizational culture) which from the interviewer's perspective would be considered a core brand activity. In further discussion, the interviewee would relate that they had not thought of brand that way before, more strongly associating brand with marketing tactics. Since direction on core organizational strategies came from the top, education at that level regarding brand would go a long way to clearing some of the misinterpretations of what it is and what it can do for their business.

> "Brand comes down from the c-level, The CEO is adamant that we adhere to the brand and what it stands for. The difficulty comes in trying to institutionalize it throughout the organization, and convince other people to buy in when they have their own areas of expertise" (SME1, 2015).

"It comes down to creating a connection and being true to yourself about what your brand needs to be. Our CEO truly gets it, and is really enlightened. Let's do what we want to. Let's be who we want to be, and if people like it, or gravitate to us, then great, then they will come along for the ride" (SME1, 2015).

"For me, being true to yourself and the values of your organization is critical, because it's so easy to sell out in terms of what your brand is. The brand speaks to so much more than what the futures are. It's about trust and reputation" (SME1, 2015).

"There had always been a focus on ergonomics before I got here. I've just tried to take it to a much higher level, so that it becomes our focus and differentiator. We wanted to get away from the catalogue look and to something more unique" (SME2, 2016).

7.2 Customer experience/engagement

All of the respondents held their customers as supremely important. The only exception was the software start-up, which was still trying to scale its product and get more beta candidates.

"We go all out with our customers. We have customers all over the US, not just in the big cities like New York, Chicago or Boston. Many of them come from small cities, so we want to immerse them in our culture and experience" (SME1, 2015).

"It comes down to brand. I can't say that we can determine an ROI from the conference, but we want them to be fans and excited about working with us. So even when times are tough, because we make complicated software and sometime we make mistakes, we want them to think at the end of the day, we're good people and trying the best to help them" (SME1, 2015).

7.3 Employee involvement

Two of the interviewees had included employee involvement as a key to their business since its inception. In two organizations it had been prioritized by new CEOs and was still evolving, and with the remaining respondents, it was not a formalized capability.

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"We have an open environment and encourage people to speak up. We have the "Collaboratory" once a year. We go off site and have a bunch of sessions, and we pick an issue and challenge that anybody can join in" (SME1, 2015).

"A lot of it is education and going to the basics. It's not a logo. When

I'm saying that brand is the experience, I'm trying to create simplicity

and ease of use in our design. Not sure what to do; is it more lunch

and learns" (SME1, 2015)?

"I try to make sure that our employees are aware of what we're

doing. It's not brand specific, but it's related to our ergonomic focus"

(SME2, 2016).

7.4 Excellence in product/service delivery

Not surprisingly, a lot of the respondents' reputations relied upon the

success of their product or service. All stated that were prepared to go the

extra mile to make sure their offering met the expectations of their

customers.

"If you want a positive reputation, you better have a damn good

product" (SME1, 2015).

8.0 Conclusions

Based on primary and secondary research, there is an apparent gap

between large enterprise brands and small (SME) brands. Big brands are

more likely to be business-to-consumer in orientation and possess more traditional brand characteristics. But in today's environment, many big brands are struggling to adapt to dynamic market forces such as the collapse of traditional media, impact of digital technologies, transparency of social media, and new, high levels of consumer power. While brand experts agree that past and current planning principles are still relevant, new elements are emerging as important and critical additions to the mix.

SMEs have a small brand disposition and a different, not particularly positive, perception of how the value of a brand adds to their business. They are often motivated by short-term needs such as monthly revenue targets and where the next order is coming from. In that context, they perceive brand as a long-term investment that produces merely tactical deliverables (logos, taglines and advertising), which provide questionable returns in terms of effort and cost and are considered operational liabilities, not as an asset.

As the interviews proceeded, it became apparent that, while they did not relate them to brand, the respondents' business models were driven by what would be considered by experts to be elements of brand thinking, especially around organizational culture and customer centricity. To demonstrate, one organization empowered their employees to go beyond

the norm to exceed customer expectations; another had leveraged the original ergonomic focus of the founders (70 years in business) to inspire a company culture committed to providing industry-leading ergonomic solutions; one business's goal was to do everything in its power to make customers love them; and lastly, one CEO talked of tapping the desire of his employees to positively impact customers by supporting a culture of empowerment, collaboration and innovation. Although they considered brand to be a separate entity, their activities were aligned with literature and research findings considered to be important brand elements.

All interviewees had limited resources and focused on specific capabilities or values as business differentiators. For the most part, they selected employee culture. However, they had not fully built-out out their culture into a cohesive brand ecosystem. Adopting a simple, logical approach that enables them to exploit their strengths, and embed, or even codify, their purpose, values and behavior in all levels of the organization would provide a compelling, motivating and foundational force for internal and external stakeholders.

9.0 What role can brand play for SMEs?

The research revealed that new factors play an important role in building brands. The secondary research described previous brand constructs in a

variety of terms such as: brand identity system, brand as asset, energized differentiation, ideals and constraints. All of these models, and their sub-elements, still provide valuable strategic contributions to brand definition and creation. But since books naturally lag behind current developments, both brand expert interviews and SME executive interviews identified emergent brand trends that were adding new core concepts and building blocks to brand development. In the following sections, these new elements are described.

9.1 Brand as culture

Brand experts consider organizational culture a key to strong brands, but one that organizations often find difficult to execute. They also noted how the power of culture is essential in providing exceptional customer experiences at all touchpoints, which in turn is one area competitors found hard to duplicate. In three SME interviews, culture was considered an important differentiator for their business. At the same time, the SME respondents do not strongly associate culture with brand. For them, the core is all about customer service and reputation. For SMEs, the implications are that they can use their cultural strengths to expand and embed brand purpose and values in all facets of their business model including hiring practices, partner selection and external relationships, and

establish a point of difference that is difficult for competitors to match. They do not necessarily think of this as brand building.

9.2 Brand as customer gateway

All brand models talk of customer focus/centricity with varying levels of importance. Early models, though, defined a brand dominant, "push"-type relationship with the customer. In 2016, the role of the customer has superseded that of the brand in the relationship.

In the next stage of the brand–customer relationship, collaboration will become more popular and customers will provide input into the products and services that come to market. One such initiative is P&G's "connect + develop", which is a crowd sourcing/open innovation platform encouraging external innovators to join with P&G in product development (P&G, 2016).

SMEs have an advantage over large business-to-consumer businesses, because open engagement with customers is already a common practice. SMEs need to understand not only the needs of customer, but how product specs can be configured to create an optimal solution for that customer. That level of fit requires open dialogue between the parties. SMEs have the opportunity to expand this form of relationship. As an example, one SME had opened up its R&D facilities for customer

prospects to come in and test competitive products. Of course, they hoped

the value of their solution turned out to be better than the competition, but

they offered the customers a no-risk opportunity to get a better idea of

what is being offered and how potential options could fit their needs.

Businesses have been capturing customer data for many years. In the

early Direct Mail days, businesses captured mostly transactional data such

as value of order, recency of purchase and lifetime customer value. This

was valuable information, as it allowed businesses to customize offers to

match behavior and encourage purchase and loyalty.

Today, businesses have a lot more data in the form of Big Data at their

disposal; in most cases, probably more than they can handle.

Organizations are coming to better understand how to consolidate multiple

data streams, perform analytics, and convert analytics into customer

insights. Usage is now being driven down to decision-making in real time,

and that pace will only quicken as the power of data is fully harnessed.

These behavioral metrics are being transformed into profiles that capture

customer preferences, which then follow the customer online with

suggestions on what to purchase based on previous purchases, or

purchases made by customers that share similar behavioral

characteristics. Offline, this information is being made available at brick

and mortar touchpoints and for employees to use when interacting with a customer (e.g. Salesforce.com). The importance here is that, regardless of how much data one has, if no one knows how to use it, it becomes a non-factor. An informed business that can convert data into insights and channel that knowledge to a committed employee who is interacting with a customer has a significant advantage over the competition. Brand plays an important role as a filter in how information is used in a way that reflects the values of the organization.

9.3 Brand as innovator

Gerzma touches on innovation with his Energized Differentiation concept but does not dig deeper into operationalizing that capability into the business. Several SMEs mentioned innovation as a contributor to their competitive advantage, but only one organization had formalized their innovation process. With others, innovation seemed more spontaneous, less defined. For SMEs, the ability to incorporate innovation into their culture, capabilities and systems is an attainable goal with long-lasting value. That kind of effort could be implemented by adapting a process such as Doblin's Ten Types of Innovation model (Keeley, 2013), which provides an easily understood framework for building innovation into the organization's culture and brand.

9.4 Brand as citizen of the community

There appears to be significant value in this concept, although it had a limited presence in the literature survey or interviews. In *Grow,* Stengel talks of businesses creating stronger social impacts, and the activities at Google and Patagonia demonstrate how organizations can take Corporate Social Responsibility to a level in which the brand and customer engage in pursuit of an issue that positively affects the community and its culture.

These kinds of initiatives also have a positive impact on employees. In the same interview where the Google story was described, the interviewee mentioned how Millennial employees of their clients strongly support these kind of programs. Since Millennials now represent the largest segment of the workforce (Buckley, 2016, p. 2), this kind of internal support is critical for employers, of whom Millennials have very different expectations than employees of the past. A 2016 Deloitte Millennial Survey reported that 87% believe "the success of a business should be measured in terms of more than just its financial performance". On top of that, Millennials remain suspicious of companies' motives, with 64% believing businesses "focus on their own agenda rather than considering the wider society" (Buckley, 2016, p. 8). These findings are indicative of the challenge in recruiting and retaining committed employees, a critical element to the success of any organization. Research indicated that within one year, 25% of Millennials,

given the choice, would quit to join another organization. When lengthened

to two years, that number goes up to 44%, and by 2020, the number

moves up to 66% (Buckley, 2016, p. 4).

This potentially high level of turnover has direct implications to SMEs.

They need to create organizations that are attractive to prospective and

current employees alike. An organizational purpose that stands for

something more than making a profit should work in their favor for both

retention and recruitment of employees.

9.5 Brand as part of the future

Strategic foresight was not highlighted as a major consideration in any of

the research, although several authors mentioned brand purpose as a

guiding light along the road to the future and its ability to simplify decision-

making – if you know what you stand for, you know how to act in various

situations. In an environment where change happens on multiple levels,

organizations that are not monitoring signals or trends and then linking

them to future business impacts are limiting their ability to deal with rapid

change. SMEs do live a somewhat more precarious life, so installing

strategic foresight capabilities into the culture would provide an early

warning system for trends that could impact their business and the

livelihood of its employees.

9.6 Brand as charter

One of the key barriers for SMEs in accepting the idea that brand is an asset versus an expense was the word "brand" itself. Because of previous experiences, the term had negative connotations. In order to reframe that perspective to one that was more in line with BAT elements such as purpose, values, culture and an organization-wide commitment to support those beliefs, brand has to become something of value in the SMEs' eyes. To create a more internal versus external focus, BAT helps SMEs to position brand as a sort of corporate charter, creating a deeper meaning for brand as an integral part of the organization. A charter is one way to describe and provide governance on the roles a brand plays in an organization and with employees. Essentially the brand charter, in collaboration with the business objectives of the organization, codifies the principles, privileges, functions and rights for brand usage at every level of the organization. This is a concept that will be explored and validated the future evolution of BAT.

9.7 Return on brand investment

The SME leaders interviewed evidently did not recognise the financial benefits associated with a strong brand. This was not surprising, because from their viewpoint, brand was as a marketing tactic, with logos,

brochures and ads as the outputs. As such, brand was viewed as an expense, not an asset, and so, they could not assign an ROI to it. Compounding their negative perception of brand value was that, in many cases, the development and executional responsibilities for brand were outsourced to a third party such as an advertising or design agency, who, the interviewees thought; "just don't get our business."

However, four of the organizations had embraced brand practices (although they did not consider it brand) as part of their organizational culture. Within that context, they talked about how empowered employees, customer centricity and innovation were generating positive returns on the bottom line. They framed their returns in terms of stronger revenues, customer satisfaction and loyalty, higher perceived customer value, faster project turnaround, and lower employee turnover. All of these results create positive revenue and margins impacts, and could be viewed as brand elements and results.

One metric could be helpful for SMEs. As brands take time and consistent effort to build, returns are not immediately evident in the short term. Net Promoter Score (NPS) (Solis, 2013) is one form of analytic that could provide value for SMEs. It is a relatively simple metric that reflects the customer's experience with the brand. The NPS is based on answering

the question: "How likely is it that you would recommend (company) to a friend or colleague?" Respondents use a10 point scale where 1 is not at all likely and ten is extremely likely. Within the scale, those who score from 0-6 are considered Detractors, 7-8s are considered Passives, and 9-10s are considered Promoters. The NPS number is calculated by subtracting the Detractors from Promoters. The resulting score can then be aggregated with other scores to provide insights into overall customer satisfaction. An additional benefit to finding the NPS is that the response can prompt a deeper dive into the customer experience, to understand reactions at each stage of the customer journey. The NPS can also be used as a benchmark against competitors, or other industries, where relevant. The greatest value is that it can be used at every customer touchpoint to provide specific feedback, and can then be added into the aggregate scores to create a broader picture.

9.8 Summary

For SMEs, brand can provide opportunities that go beyond their perceptions of brand as a product or a marketing tactic. Although these elements remain part of the overall mix, real brand opportunities lie elsewhere. The brand's responsibility is to take the values and purpose of the business and use those strengths as a motivating force for both internal and external stakeholders. Once the organization's authentic

purpose or vision is determined, the first priority for any SME is to establish its brand values in its culture. These are areas where the organization has control. By harnessing brand strengths and embedding them in the corporate culture, SMEs can create superior and sustainably positive customer experiences. Only a motivated and committed workforce has the capability to deliver a superior experience on a consistent basis at every customer touchpoint.

An SME's biggest challenge is how to build a business in an extremely competitive environment, where any point of advantage in product or price is difficult to protect. Many still consider traditional marketing strategies and thinking as their only options. One untapped opportunity is to develop their brand and discover how to use it effectively. Once brand is distanced from traditional marketing outputs, and instead framed in the more strategically significant building blocks of purpose, culture, community, foresight, innovation and customer centricity, it can act as a momentum builder for the whole organization and all its stakeholders.

What SMEs need is a process that will uncover the brand truths that underlie their organization and can be used to move their business forward. An initial look at the process is presented in the next section.

10.0 Brand Actualization Tool (BAT)

10.1 Description

The author of this paper consolidated thinking from the literature survey

with brand expert and SME interviews to create a unique brand planning

tool for use by SMEs in pursuit of their business goals. Called the Brand

Actualization Tool (BAT), it incorporates the following design guidelines:

- Make development simple and easy for all stakeholders

- Support collaborative development processes

- Use new brand elements that are attuned to SME needs

- Identify stages of development and how they impact each other

- Create a living brand document that can be adjusted in response to
changes

- Be expressed with something that is visually appealing

10.2 The intersection of brand models

The different brand models explored in this paper fall into two camps: pre-

2008 recession, when models reflected the power of the brand, and post-

2008, when digital and social media emerged, powerfully enabling

customers and diminishing the strength of brands. Although the main

elements of the groups differ, they do complement each other, and both

influence today's brands. For brands to successfully connect with today's highly connected customer, they must include the most current set of brand model elements.

The first models, which included the thinking of JWT, Aaker and Davis, were structurally sound and provided a disciplined, systemic approach to brand creation and marketplace application. This worked well when brands dominated the brand-customer relationship and could successfully rely on marketing communications to influence customer behavior. Then, messaging focused on singular attributes such as product performance or quality, and was based on language such as Unique Selling Proposition. These choices were correct in a marketing environment of limited media options and easily segmented audiences. They are insufficient in a marketplace that is technology-driven, multi-channel, and fragmented, and in which customers are both elusive and demanding.

Today's customers are influenced by friends and third-party sources more than by brands; brand communications have become a weak, untrusted force in the customer decision-making process. Nonetheless, most strategic elements of the brand planning systems models explored in this paper remain relevant, so long as they are reconfigured or augmented to

address new customer needs. An important part of that recalibration is the use of purpose and organizational culture as brand engines.

The models developed by Gerzma, Stengel and Morgan emerged in the post-recession years after 2008, and sought to address the new demands of customer engagement. Their focus was less on a systemic brand framework and more on elements such as energy, ideals, and constraints as the new sources of brand strength. These intangibles comprise the ingredients of brand made for today, but no one has provided the recipe. How are organizations supposed to operationalise this new model and align beliefs and brand elements with new emergent trends?

The BAT brings forward applicable disciplines and elements from earlier models and uses them in conjunction with the newer brand elements that have emerged from the complex marketing environment and needs of an equally complex customer. BAT weaves together past and current brand thinking, using all the relevant elements to connect their customers to their brands, and the organizational cultures from which they emerge.

Organizational culture received only minor mentions in pre-2008 brand models and more emphasis in post-2008. The importance of culture to brand has increased dramatically since then, and is of particular

importance to SMEs. Organizational culture is now a core driver for adding brand elements that support new customer priorities. In BAT, organizational purpose is articulated early in the Motivation stage and then provides overarching guidance for the remaining stages, wherein it acts as a charter of the brand's defining values and beliefs, and charts its future direction. The Embed stage takes the purpose, or vision, and deploys it throughout the organization in a more actionable form. Many of BAT's new elements and their contribution to brand identity appear in this stage and include capabilities such as innovation, content, and foresight. These attributes can only be brought to life through a motivated and committed culture; embedding these values and capabilities into the culture provides the foundation and framework for the Engage stage, when customer interaction takes place and customer centricity is of paramount importance. The Engage stage introduces more new elements, such as expanded customer experience capabilities, along with a new brand- as-citizen element. While customer centricity has been part of all models, it has moved to a much higher level recently, as analytics, social media and collaboration place customer centricity at the center of brand engagement.

One element that has increased in importance of late is the power of analytics, which show up in BAT's Evaluation stage. The power of Big Data is an exponential improvement over previous measurement

practices. In earlier models, the collection of metrics were lagging

indicators, as action was only possible after data collection and analysis

had taken place over some lengthy period of time. Today's use of data is

nearing real time measurement, making nearly immediate action available

in both off and online environments.

For SMEs, purpose, organizational culture and new supporting brand

elements works are particularly important. Based on the SME interviews,

leadership is more likely to support initiatives in these areas, because the

nature of the brand elements is closely intertwined with their organizational

values and beliefs, and organizational leaders have more agile control

over their application than those of very large organizations. The applied

brand elements, in turn, play a significant role, combined with product or

service excellence, in building enthusiasm and commitment among

employees, which in turn supports the right conditions for developing

exceptional customer experiences.

10.3 Brand Actualization Tool – the basics

The BAT building blocks are based around three design elements. The

Primary Outcome is the result of Contributing Outcome(s), which is/are

achieved by supporting Effort Priorities (more granular tactical activities).

The intent in developing BAT was to create a process that is relatively

simple, logical and accessible to all SME employees. It also seeks to mix higher level thinking with more tactical elements contained in the Effort Priorities. For SMEs, the BAT is heavily weighted on the first two stages: Motivate and Embed.

Effort Priorities   Contributing Outcome   Primary Outcome (Stage)

Model Stages

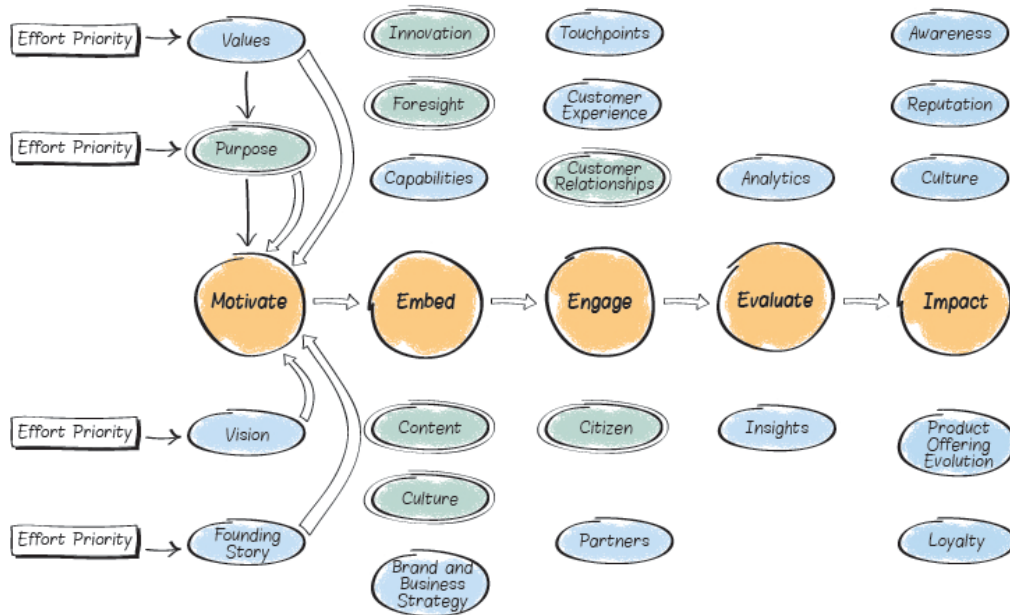Motivate   Embed   Engage   Evaluate   Impact
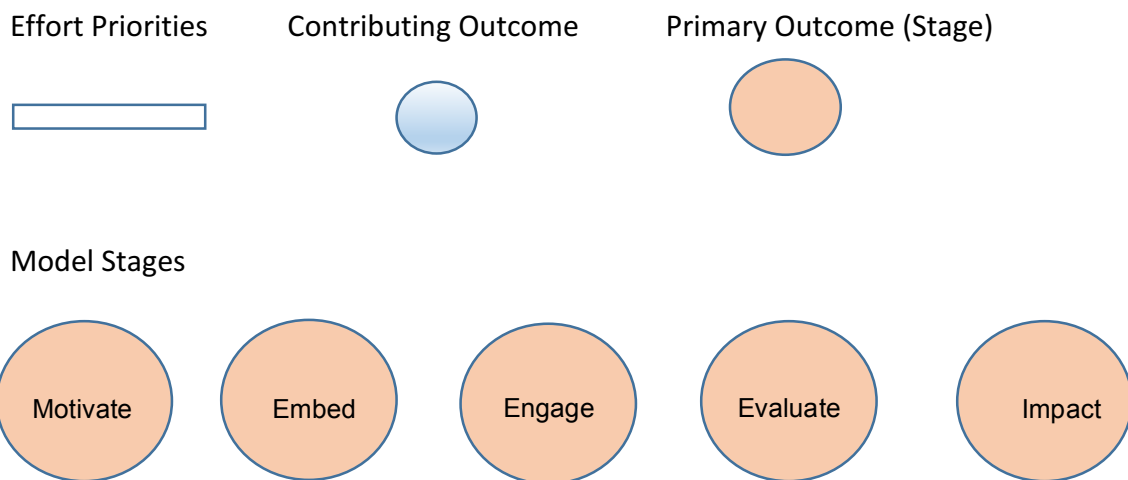
Figure 12 - Brand Actualization Tool

Based on primary and secondary research, it is believed that the first two stages will have the most impact in terms of building the framework for a strong brand, engaging all employees in the process, and creating positive, sustainable growth for the business.

10.4 Brand Actualization Tool – Details

Stage 1 – Motivate	
Primary Outcome: Define vision and purpose that drives/inspires the business and all it stakeholders.	
Effort Priorities	**Contributing Outcome**
What's the story behind the creation of the company?	• Founding story
What values do we represent?	• Core values
What do we believe in?	• Core beliefs
Where do we want to be in 5, 10, 15 years? What will people to say about us?	• Vision

Stage 2 – Embed	
Primary Outcome: Operationalize the motivating purpose in all aspects of the organization in order to support external programs in Engage stage.	
Effort Priorities	**Contributing Outcome**
How do we create a motivated and supportive organizational culture?	Organization culture • Hiring/Training/Retention • Collaboration • Innovation
Where do we need most to excel in order to provide our offering? What should we outsource?	Capabilities • Experience/Service • Sales • Manufacturing/R&D • Internal systems & operations
What stories can we tell that will support our purpose and resonate with customers?	• Content development strategy & production
Where can we add value to our business?	• Innovation practices
What's our plan?	• Brand and business strategy
What's happening in our business environment and outside of it? How do these trends affect our organization? What actions could we pursue to address the future impact of these trends?	• Foresight strategy

Stage 3 – Engage	
Primary Outcome: Provide customers with multi-level brand experience that exceeds their expectations.	
Effort Priorities	**Contributing Outcome**
Where, how and when do we interact with our customers?	Touchpoint consistency • Traditional, digital and social media • Bricks and mortar • Salesforce/customer service
How do we meet the needs of our customers during the purchase process? What is the ideal customer experience?	Customer experience • Research • Customer panels/steering groups • Customer co-creation/ collaboration

Who are our best customers? How do we interact with them outside of the purchase experience? What else can we do for them?	• Customer relationships
What community associations, outside of the company, best connect with our and our customers' values?	• Community engagement
With whom do we like to work? What values should we share?	• Partners

Stage 4 – Evaluate	
Primary Outcome: Capture relevant metrics related to initiatives; analyze data then use insights to modify programs.	
Effort Priorities	**Contributing Outcome**
How do we access analytics to understand the success of our business activities?	• Analytics sources and configuration
How do we use analytics to improve the success of our business activities?	• Insight engine

Stage 5 – Impact	
Primary Outcome: How do our actions impact future business, market and cultural outcomes?	
Effort Priorities	**Contributing Outcome**
How could our actions today affect the future of our business?	• Awareness • Brand reputation • Culture • Product/service offering • Customer loyalty

Table 9 - Brand Actualization Tool Details

10.5 How could an engagement work?

Although not finalised, the BAT process will focus on a generative design research process that stresses inclusivity, collaboration and co-creation. Employees (and potentially, customers and partners) will be critical participants in the development of the brand and its supporting

organizational ecology. As such, the implementation of the tool is seen as a multi-stage process. The early Motivate stage would be preceded only by a content collection stage, in which all information related to the brand would be consolidated and prepared for wider distribution among participants. Information such as the history of the organization, beliefs and values of founders, business profile, competitive stance, customer and employee research, etc., would be captured and collated. A multi-disciplined steering group would be responsible for the content collection and for posing key questions and prioritising subjects for discussion by the larger group.

Once content preparation is complete, it would be shared with the larger group of participants and used as a benchmark for a workshop using dialogic design principles, such as those used in a World Café. The goal is to capture the collective knowledge and insights of those who know the brand best and ultimately be responsible for disseminating the brand throughout the organization and to external shareholders. The final outputs from the Motivate Stage would be the codification of organizational purpose, values, beliefs and vision, to define the primary building blocks of the brand.

With the brand framework in hand, the Embed Stage would follow. It would take place in a similar, collaborative environment such as a World Café,

where the goal of the participants would be to translate their previous

insights into the activities and capabilities needed to operationalise the

brand within the organization. The completion of the Embed Stage would

establish the platform from which to launch the Engage Stage, which

would leverage the capabilities and insights from the Embed Stage to

develop activities and programs to connect the brand with organization's

external stakeholders.

The Engage Stage would include a variety of metric targets and analytic

tools. The metrics would be channeled into the Evaluation Stage for

analysis and comparison to benchmarks established in the first three

stages.

At that point, the internal team would review the results and determine

what actions could be taken to correct issues or take advantage of

opportunities presented in the data. In order to maintain ownership of the

brand, it is important to reconvene internal stakeholders on a regular basis

to ensure that the purpose and vision of the brand continues to drive the

brand forward in a positive manner that includes not only profit, but also

other attributes such as reputation, customer experience and authenticity.

One of the keys to the ongoing nature of the process is to give the

organization and its employees the tools and knowledge to continue their efforts internally, without relying on third parties to facilitate the process.

10.6 Do SMEs have the flexibility and capacity to undertake the process?

During the interviews, discussions took place regarding the flexibility and capacity of SMEs to adopt a brand-focused approach to their business. Some thought SMEs were better suited to the process that larger organizations because they were structurally more agile and had a smaller workforce. Others thought the opposite; SME leaders were so heavily engaged in the daily operations of the company that they had little time to spare. Limited resources is a challenge for all organizations, so how do they mobilise commitment of time and other resources to make brand an agent of change?

The author believes that SMEs, with fewer divisions and actors, are better positioned to make this shift than larger organizations. However, for a brand program to succeed, members of the organization must feel themselves to have a vested interest in making it happen. SMEs, with their smaller employee base, potentially possess a greater sense of connectedness than what one would find in a large, global corporation. That simplifies the creation of a strong brand from both a conceptual and

operational framework. The key to success depends on employees owning the organization's story and representing its values, purpose and promise to the customer.

Outsourcing brand development, such as hiring an agency or consultant, is a self-defeating process; employees are left out of the process while third party vendors do not possess the intimate knowledge of what makes the business special. The BAT approach is built around harnessing the thinking of employees, and even customers, in the first two stages, Motivate and Engage, to establish the brand framework, as employees are critical to the articulation and implementation of the brand charter throughout the organization. In order to capture that thinking, BAT employs an iterative approach (i.e. not a one-day retreat). The basic progression is to convene a series of short meetings, capturing each meeting's insights, distributing them prior to the next meeting, and repeating the process. Building the brand charter is a creative, design systems style process. Participants need time to reflect in order to make a lasting and worthy contribution.

Following an iterative approach, as outlined above, creates fertile conditions for success within an SME. BAT addresses their resource constraints by spreading the process over a number of sessions, which

provides flexibility in scheduling while allowing participants to reflect on insights captured in the sessions and take that knowledge to a higher, or deeper, level.

10.7 Next Steps

The next steps will be to validate the tool through a combination of exploratory initiatives that include:

- Validating the model with a larger sample of SMEs

- Exploring the new model elements to gain a deeper understanding of their relevance and utility to the SME market

- Designing a training curriculum

- Developing a discussion guide and facilitation methodology

- Refining the BAT design based on feedback

- Exploring the relationship between BAT and standard strategy practices (e.g. balanced scorecard)

In addition to refining the BAT, efforts would be directed at gaining greater exposure and acceptance for the model with a wider audience. This would include the following steps:

- Present BAT at industry conferences/meetings to explain its potential value to all SMEs

- Explore presentation opportunities with SME organizations such the Toronto Board of Trade, Canadian Federation of Independent

Businesses and Ontario Ministry of Economic Development,

Employment and Infrastructure

- Conduct seminars with SME groups

- Teach BAT in academic environments (Chang School) as either a
workshop or as an element of full courses

- Produce white papers on BAT, including creating supporting case
studies

- Establish a web presence to provide more information on the
process and application

- Write an e-book that provides a hands-on approach for interested
SMEs

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Appendices
Appendix A – Brand experts discussion guide

1:1 Depth Interviews with Brand Experts
Discussion Guide – October 20/15

Introduction
- Describe intent of research and provide consent form for signature, if it has not already been signed.
- Explain confidentially aspect of research and how their answers will remain anonymous in the final report

Questions
Participant Background & Beliefs
- Tell me about what you currently do in your business and some background on how you ended up where you are today?
- What kind of branding trends do you notice in today's marketplace? How do they differ from 10 years ago? What has been successful? Not successful?
- What characteristics of a brand are most important to you when developing a brand identity platform?
- What brand characteristics resonate the most with today's consumers?
- How do you think organizations are meeting those consumer needs?

Work Experience
When you conduct branding engagements with clients or within your own organization…
- How do clients/employees view the importance of branding in their organization?
- What kind of barriers do you encounter and how do you overcome them?
- Once the branding strategy has been completed, how have your clients' perceptions changed? What got them the most excited? The least excited? Does that change last?
- How do they evaluate the value of the process and the final outputs?

What does the future hold?
- What is the best part of the current branding project you're working on?
- Looking out 5 years, what will be the difference makers in brand development?

Closing
- Anything you want to add?
- Thank the participant for their contribution and ask if they have any questions.

Appendix B – SME discussion guide

1:1 Depth Interviews with SMEs
SMB Discussion Guide – February 22, 2016

Introduction
- Describe intent of research and provide consent form for signature, if it has not already been signed.
- Explain confidentially aspect of research and how their answers will remain anonymous in the final report

Questions
Tell me a little bit about your business:
- What product or service do you provide?
- What markets do you sell into? (local, national, NA, international)
- What makes your organization successful? How do you remain successful?
- How many employees do you have?
- How do you acquire customers?
- What are your biggest opportunities? Challenges?

When I mention brand or branding to you, what immediately comes to mind?

Has branding's importance increased or decreased in your market over the last 10 years? How has its importance shifted?

Is branding part of your internal strategy conversations? If so, what role does it play?

How would you describe the _____brand? What elements are most important? What elements are not important?

How do you position your company against competitive offerings?

What kind of personality would you associate with your company?

How involved are your employees in the development of strategy/vision? Is it a collaborative or hierarchal process?

How would customers describe your organization?

How could branding playing a role in your future goals?

What would shift your perception about the importance of brands?

Closing
- Thank the participant for their contribution and ask if they have any questions or information they would like to add.