



# Intended brand associations: Do they really drive consumer response?



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## ABSTRACT

Brand managers exhibit considerable effort to define intended brand associations to anchor in consumers' minds. They follow a credo deeply rooted in branding literature: intended brand associations drive consumer response and brand equity. This article investigates the benefits of a strong overlap of actual consumer brand associations and management-intended brand associations (brand association match). The article presents results from two large-scale studies (3353 and 1201 respondents) involving one consumer goods and one service brand with multiple operationalizations of consumer response (attitudinal and behavioral). The results show that consumers with high brand association match show more positive brand response. However, after accounting for the valence of associations match does not add explanatory power. This outcome challenges a key foundation of brand management. The discussion identifies reasons why match may not be necessary to achieve response and provides arguments why the results do not imply free play for brand managers.

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## 1. Introduction

What consumers know about a brand influences their response, that is, how they feel and act with respect to a brand (Alba & Hutchinson, 2000; Keller, 1993; Krishnan, 1996). Brand knowledge management is therefore a crucial strategic task for brand managers (Aaker, 1996; Kapferer, 2004; Keller, 2003). Towards that end, many organizations define intended associations, for instance, attributes, user imageries or benefits, and build programs to make consumers aware and fond of these elements (Brown, Dacin, Pratt, & Whetten, 2006; Malaer, Nyffenegger, Krohmer, & Hoyer, 2011). Take the example of BMW. The desired brand image consists of three core elements (dynamic, challenging, and cultivated) with three attributes that describe each element's meaning respectively (Esch, 2010, p. 98). Now imagine two potential BMW buyers, Alex and Bill. When thinking of BMW, both elicit six associations. In the case of Alex, five are part of the BMW-intended set, whereas only two of Bill's associations belong to this set. Does this matter?

Managerial and scientific branding literature argues that brand association match, the overlap of *actual* with *intended* brand associations, leads to positive consumer response (cf. Aaker, 2005; Kapferer, 2004; Kotler, 2003). This article examines this deeply rooted assumption by

adding to the limited extant research on brand match (Malaer et al., 2011) in two essential ways. First, it compares consumers' free brand associations (Keller, 1993) with management-intended brand associations. Such an approach allows respondents to freely express themselves without forcing them to think in predefined dimensions. Second, it follows Krishnan's (1996) advice to conduct intra-brand studies focusing on multiple consumers of specific brands and the variation of equity among them. This study thereby avoids factors that might contaminate the study of brand association match across multiple brands like desired positioning (broad versus focused), history, or (the quality of) specific marketing activities.<sup>2</sup>

To enhance generalizability, this article reports results from two large-scale intra-brand studies focusing on (a) a consumer goods brand (sample: 3353) and (b) a service brand (sample: 1201), using multiple operationalizations of response (attitudinal and behavioral). The large sample size per brand provides for a robust analysis of the match-response link through a sufficiently large number of respondents with varying degrees of match.

Results show that consumers with higher match exhibit more positive brand response. However, the number and valence of brand associations fully capture the effect of brand association match. Various tests show the robustness of this finding. The article discusses a number of reasons why match may not be necessary to achieve response, but also provides arguments why defining intended brand associations may not be a waste of time.

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<sup>2</sup> The intention is not to compare the effectiveness of brand positioning approaches; for example, many versus few or abstract versus concrete associations.

## 2. Theoretical development

### 2.1. Brand associations and brand response

Keller's (1993) framework of customer-based brand equity provides a useful theoretical foundation for studying the link between brand associations and response. Keller (1993) conceptualizes brand knowledge as associations in consumers' minds that vary by favorability (positive evaluation), strength (closeness to the brand node), and uniqueness (exclusive to one brand in the product category). Equity is high when the consumer is familiar with the brand and holds favorable, strong, and unique brand associations in memory (Kamakura & Russell, 1991). Along the hierarchy of effects, these associations lead to an evaluative or behavioral response, for example, commitment, trust, purchase intention, or recommendation (e.g., Broniarczyk & Alba, 1994; Janiszewski & van Osselaer, 2000; Lane, 2000). Many studies examine aspects of the association–response link and confirm that knowledge about a brand affects, for example, choice or willingness-to-pay (e.g., Agarwal & Rao, 1996; Cobb-Walgren, Ruble, & Donthu, 1995).

One key aspect of brand associations impacting brand response is the *number* of brand associations resulting from brand experiences consumers had over time (Alba & Hutchinson, 1987). The more familiar a consumer is with a brand the more likely she exhibits response to the marketing of the brand. Several studies empirically confirm the impact of the number of brand associations on consumer response (e.g., Bennett, Haertel, & McColl-Kennedy, 2005; Krishnan, 1996). Another brand knowledge facet influencing consumer brand response is *valence* which captures the relative presence of positive versus negative associations (Krishnan, 1996). Positive associations are a strategic asset (Weigelt & Camerer, 1988) and source of sustainable comparative advantage (Barich & Kotler, 1991), leading to more positive brand response (e.g., Krishnan, 1996; Spears, Brown, & Dacin, 2006). Also the *uniqueness* of brand associations may drive brand response. Even though a brand may benefit from some shared associations that identify the brand as a member of a category, unique brand associations should differentiate the brand from other category members (Keller, Sternthal, & Tybout, 2002). Krishnan (1996) investigates this link and finds evidence for the relevance of the uniqueness of brand associations.

In summary, extant research focuses on explaining differences between brands and largely agrees that more, positive, and unique associations differentiate strong from weak brands.

### 2.2. The link between brand association match and brand response

Most popular marketing and branding scholars agree that brand managers need to (a) specify a set of associations to link with the brand, and (b) to align activities for consumers to learn these associations. Brand association match is therefore a cornerstone of effective brand building (cf. Aaker, 2005; Kapferer, 2004; Kotler, 2003). For example, consultancy McKinsey emphasizes the importance of delivering on *brand triggers*, key aspects of the brand promise (Court, Mitten, Narasimhan, & Berry, 2001). Kotler (2003) describes effective branding as “...*associating* (the brand's name) with a desirable benefit...” which “...works best when the target market believes that the company is best at delivering the benefit” (p. 420). Hence, the challenge for a brand manager does consist not only in choosing (a set of) desirable benefits for the target market, but also in making sure that the target market is aware of them. Aaker (2012, p. 48) proposes defining “must haves”, that is, “desirable benefits or associations that a meaningful segment will insist on having”, while Keller (2003, p. 15) argues for “...the association of the brand in customers' minds with a specific product class or customer need ... to *firmly establish* the brand meaning in the minds of customers (i.e., by *strategically linking* a host of tangible and intangible brand associations)”. Also,

organizational brand management processes of (a) positioning (i.e., defining intended associations); (b) fostering (i.e., establishing associations); and (c) monitoring (i.e., controlling the effectiveness of activities) highlight the importance of brand association match. The implicit assumption underlying branding theory and practice is that match leads to beneficial outcomes for the brand in terms of attitudes, intentions or behavior.

Whether consumers with different levels of match indeed respond differently to brands has received scant empirical attention. Malaer et al. (2011) relate the fit between intended and realized brand personality to loyalty and brand share. The authors find a positive relationship between these constructs and conclude that organizations should make sure that the intended brand personality matches consumers' perceptions. The present study takes an intra-, not an inter-brand perspective, as suggested by Krishnan (1996). Instead of comparing multiple brands (Malaer et al., 2011), which is subject to confounding factors (e.g., the brand's desired positioning or the brand's history), this study compares consumers of a specific brand to understand whether different levels of association match lead to different levels of response.

A number of consumer theories provide reasons why brand association match might further brand equity. For example, the disconfirmation paradigm asserts that satisfaction is a function of the match between expectations and actual experience (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985). Experiences in line with expectations cause confirmation; experiences not up to expectations result in disconfirmation. Transferring this paradigm to the area of branding and conceptualizing brands as promises (Aaker, 2005; Keller, 2003) allows speculation that a kept promise (an experience in line with a consumer's expectation) results in more satisfaction than a broken promise. Consumers whose brand association match is high should experience more kept promises than those whose perceptions differ (assuming that management is successful in creating touchpoints in line with intended brand associations). Dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) also illustrates a likely impact of association match on brand response. Dissonance results from conflicting cognitions and leads to uncomfortable tension. To avoid dissonance, consumers accommodate (Fiske & Taylor, 1991) or ignore conflicting information (Dearborn & Simon, 1958) and show selective attention (Dearborn & Simon, 1958). Such filtering of information may lead to even stronger assimilation for high and even more mismatch for low match consumer groups (Sherif & Hovland, 1961). In summary, for a given brand, consumers with higher degrees of brand association match should respond more positively to that brand.

## 3. Empirical design

Relating brand association match to brand response calls for a research approach that differs from existing inter-brand association-response studies. These studies select a set of brands and then relate the average association structure of consumers to the performance of these brands. The unit of interest in this study, however, is not the brand, but the individual consumer. The study focuses on the impact of variation in brand association match between consumers of one brand on their individual brand response.

### 3.1. Sampling considerations

The empirical part of this paper explores the link between brand association match and established measures of brand response. In order to enhance generalizability of results this study examines this relationship for two brands operating in distinct industries (consumer goods and services). Sampling of brands and informants poses certain requirements. First, the brands under investigation should be successful and not target niche markets. For brands failing in the marketplace, desired brand associations may either not appeal to a large part of the market, or the company has failed in transmitting them successfully.

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