The Yellow Papers Series

Brand consistency redefined

Achieving constancy of purpose and the 70/30 rule

DDB

The sooner brand owners and managers change their definition of and approach to consistency, the sooner they will profit from increased relevance, differentiation, and influence.

Next to differentiation, consistency has been the second most important tenet of branding. Most methodologies or theories of brand creation and management include consistency as a major component of the process. Brands are criticized or lauded based on the uniform and consistent experience they deliver. Yet, as branding has become an increasingly respected and critical corporate strategy and function, we remain stuck with the original definition of brand consistency when it has changed so dramatically in practice. This is a change largely prompted by the customer who wants both reliability and customization.

The world of brand communications and delivery has evolved from centrally produced and enforced guidelines demanding 100% compliance. The new approach allows and respects appropriate doses of freedom within form. The sooner brand owners and managers change their definition of and approach to consistency, the sooner they will profit from increased relevance, differentiation, and influence. This is a mind-set requiring adaptation and change. As Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote: "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds."

This paper makes the case for redefining brand consistency and provides a new definition and approach to enhance brand value. In short, it introduces the approach called Constancy of Purpose: an emerging brand strategy that capitalizes on the benefits of ubiquity and uniformity while encouraging flexibility to ensure relevance and differentiation without eroding long-term credibility and trust.

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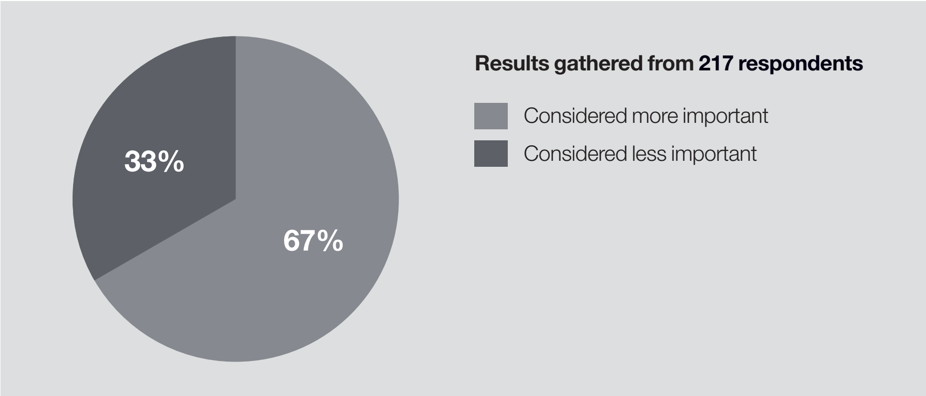
Fig 1 **Is consistency in branding becoming any more or less important?**



The Research Is Consistent
During the month of September 2007, DDB posed a question on its website that asked: "Is consistency in branding becoming any more or less important?" Of the 217 respondents to the question, 67% indicated it is becoming more important with the remaining percentage indicating less (Figure 1).

The DDB Business Communications blog also explored consistency during the month of September and received the following observations:

- "It is important to keep the company's core positioning and the values it stands up for."

- "I see it as understanding and addressing cultural and business practice differences. What customers value and perceive as positive in one place may be perceived materially different elsewhere. It is very important that businesses ensure that their brands can bridge these cultural differences, if they are to have a greater geographical reach, penetration, and financial success."

- "I am increasingly challenged on the consistency part (of branding). So I am regularly and enthusiastically reshaping our offer to be more relevant."

- "It seems that we should not disrupt the basics like logo and colors but allow for customers experiencing the brand to customize according to their own wants and needs."

- "We have to remember that consistency is directly related to reliability and critical to longer-term brand success. Some consumers like to depend on the same thing every time. You can lose customers if you are not reliable."

What is gleaned from this discussion and the survey question is that consistency is actually becoming more important in branding but it has changed in definition and application.

Fig 2 **How centralized are your brand management efforts?**

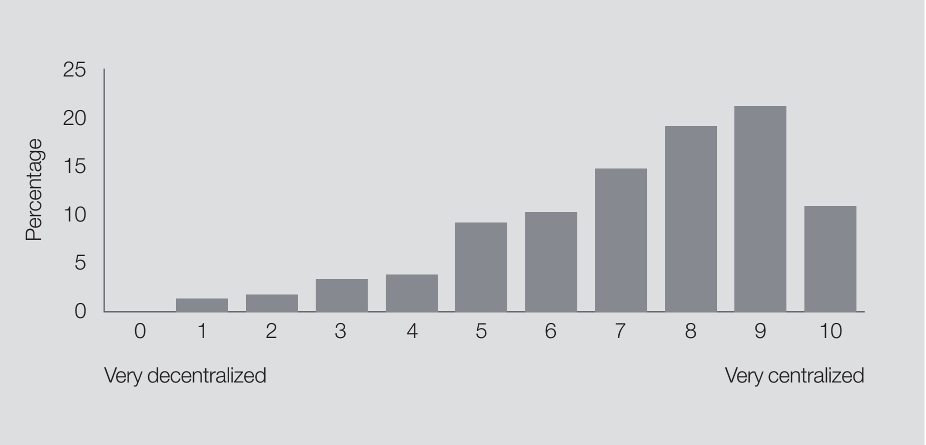
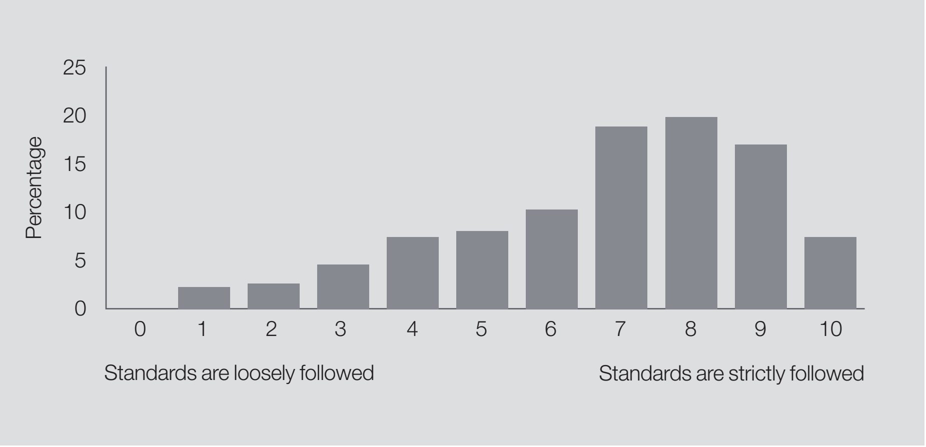


Fig 3 **Describe how strictly your company adheres to brand standards**



These findings are further supported by Interbrand's 2007 "Brand Marketers Report" that I had the pleasure of commissioning and editing. The report was based on an online survey placed on www.brandchannel.com that saw 299 brand leaders respond. There were three insights resulting from the report relevant to brand consistency:

1. Strict adherence to brand standards creates brands with customer impact, but few companies have been able to secure consistent compliance across their organizations.

2. Centrally managed brands are no more influential with customers than decentralized ones. The benefits of centralized brand management are likely more operational, such as efficiency of effort, scale and tighter controls.

3. Brand practitioners believe Consistency is the most important aspect of successful branding, followed by Understanding the Customer/Target and Messaging/Communication Effectiveness.

The respondents represented organizations where brand management is very centralized (Figure 2). Interestingly, over 80% of the respondents' organizations have Visual Brand Guidelines in place and close to 60% also offer language guidelines (the latter being a best practice). However, there was a range in compliance across these organizations (Figure 3).

Respondents also ranked critical aspects of successful branding and Consistency was number one. Relevance and Differentiation, theoretically and historically of significant importance, were actually numbers five and six. It should be noted that this was an open-ended question, so respondents were not choosing from a menu but rather chose Consistency without specific prompting.

This background research is important because it prompts three key questions:

- In what manner is brand consistency becoming more important?
- If the benefits of strict brand compliance are so compelling, why do organizations continue to struggle with enforcement?
- If centrally managed brands are no more successful than decentralized ones, are top-down strategy and strict compliance necessary?

By no means is this paper advocating a wholesale departure from consistency and its associated benefits but rather a re-examination of what consistency means in the evolving practice of branding.

Brand owners have sought the utmost consistency because any ambiguous behavior is often interpreted negatively and felt financially.

The Case for Consistency
Branding has long-term benefits. Many leading brands have held their position for years. One needs only look at the various brand rankings for proof. In fact, I completed a study in 2004 that looked at 24 brand methodologies and rankings that identified common factors associated with leading brands. It should not come as a surprise that the same brands appeared across the various rankings. These included, but were not limited to, Pepsi, Starbucks, IBM, Nokia, Nike, and Disney. The study identified the three attributes of "great" brands as:

- They are built from a single great idea (e.g., Starbucks as a "third place" after home and work).
- They hold true to their core purpose and values (e.g., Nike offering physical self-improvement for all).
- They employ brand as the central organizing principle of the business (e.g., Disney's commitment to magical experiences).

Further, the study isolated five best practices of great brands:

- Continual delivery of their brand promise.
- Possession of superior products, services and technologies.
- Clear ownership of a distinct position.
- Commitment to "internal" branding for employee engagement.
- Culture of improvement and innovation.

These leaders have pursued a high degree of consistency in visual, verbal, sonic and tactile brand identity across the geographies and markets they choose to compete in. They deliver a largely consistent customer experience worldwide, often supported by an integrated global marketing effort. There is little doubt that the most successful brands historically have communicated and delivered a high level of consistency.

This commitment to consistency is attributed to extensive studies which quote that the typical consumer requires at least seventeen impressions of a brand before considering trial use. Brand owners therefore subscribe to the theory that those impressions had better be consistent to ensure clarity. The risk is that the brand will require more communication investment because prospective consumers may confuse association.

Much of this thinking has been influenced by Leon Festinger's work in cognitive dissonance in the late 1950's. He found that consistency holds a certain power to persuade human behavior as a motivator or to dissuade when an offer is inconsistent with one's existing beliefs. So business communicators of that period and since have leveraged the research and used consistency for connection and reinforcement to drive awareness, trial, repeat purchase, loyalty, and advocacy.

Consistency has also provided operational benefits in branding through efficiencies and cost control. It ensures that there is not a wholesale license to change the brand within the organization. This, of course, has come from the nearly universally employed and time-honored tactic of issuing brand guidelines. Guidelines are invaluable for ensuring necessary uniformity in key brand elements like the logo, tagline, color palette, type styles, sizes, sounds, textures, terminology, and any other components deemed central to the brand.

Interestingly, our world values consistency as a quality, whether commercially or generally in life. Personally, we do not react well to inconsistent people. We often associate those who are consistent with personal and intellectual strengths. Some brand professionals have extended this thinking by pointing out that brands are relationships. And the most fulfilling and healthy relationships are built upon trust. Consistency is an aspect of trust that one comes to rely on to deliver expected behavior over time.

Brand owners have sought the utmost consistency because any ambiguous behavior is often interpreted negatively and felt financially. So brands have pursued consistency to avoid certain risks and obtain long-held benefits.

Eighty percent of companies believe they deliver a superior customer experience, but only 8 percent of their customers agree.

Consistency Equals Constrictive
There is a rapidly emerging counter argument to strict consistency in branding. For the most part, brand owners continue to think about consistency in a very traditional way. Increasingly, brand consistency is taking on a different definition and new application. To paraphrase Mark Twain, the only truly consistent person is the one who changes. As noted in the research of this paper, it is incredibly difficult for businesses regardless of size, industry or style to have each part of their organizations comply completely with the entirety of all prescribed brand and marketing guidelines.

These nonconformers are not all mavericks in far-flung outposts who dare to challenge head office with misplaced entrepreneurial zeal. These are intelligent and committed leaders and managers who recognize that one size does not fit all when it comes to branding.

One industry where this is readily apparent is professional services. I have been involved in the branding and marketing of this industry for fifteen years and have exhausted long hours on the “us versus them” phenomenon that results. It begins with head office establishing strategies with the best intentions for uniform global application. The regions receive them and distill clear benefits but cannot adopt 100% of what has been delivered because of some combination of language, cultural, and buyer behavioral differences.

This happens in all industries, not only professional services. Not all aspects of a brand are relevant in all markets (one only has to remember the messaging Scandinavian vacuum manufacturer Electrolux used in a campaign targeted to North Americans: “Nothing sucks like an Electrolux”). So a series of back and forth discussions take place between head office and the regions invariably frustrating both parties who ironically have the same best interests in mind.

Another factor perhaps more important in the debate on the efficacy of brand consistency comes from the customer perspective. Quite simply, how can you have a 100% consistent brand when your customers are so richly and vastly diverse? It is no longer enough to think in broad demographic terms in order to satisfy marketing plans and targets. It is critical to think about customization and engagement rather than broadcasting. This means the brand cannot anticipate nor dictate proper application in all possible scenarios. Rigid branding across numerous touch points forces prospective audiences into often narrow and artificial groups that are post rationalized by marketers as being homogeneous.

Interestingly, eighty percent of companies believe they deliver a superior customer experience, but, only 8 percent of their customers agree according to a Bain & Company study. One assumes this is because companies have lost sight of the fact that customers expect customization, especially today. We know that parents of Baby Boomers were lucky if they had toys, Boomers had “Operation” and hockey games that controlled the fun in narrow slots, while today children create social networks and virtual worlds with little or no constraint. Today’s consumers abhor being grouped, controlled, or pandered to.

"Consistency is the last refuge of the unimaginative."

The constraints of consistency for consistencies sake continue when one examines creativity, innovation and evolution in branding. Every day a brand is interacted with countless times. Each of these interactions represents valuable intelligence as to whether the brand is competitively differentiated, highly relevant, and appropriately consistent. If properly assessed and acted upon, brand owners and managers can continuously ensure renewal over the brand for competitive advantage. This supports Oscar Wilde's observation that "consistency is the last refuge of the unimaginative."

We know that customer preferences, competitive frameworks, and market conditions are incredibly dynamic. Renewing and refreshing the brand is the most strategic of responsibilities and incredibly consuming tactically, given the attention required to manage the myriad of details. The brand professional must determine what cannot change and what must change. This constant struggle allows for clearer articulation, more creative presentation, and delivery of differential value. This is the essence of great branding.

All of which are being steadily recognized. Centrally managed brands, with consistent execution globally, are the preferred means of brand management by 60% of executives. Yet 67% agree or strongly agree that local customization of a brand has a positive impact on sales according to the Economist Intelligence Unit. Business leaders are accepting the fact that an acceptable loosening of guidelines can drive growth – an interesting challenge to conventional thinking.

Unchecked consistency cannot help in these days of audience fragmentation, new media and technology, new measurement, and new methods of using traditional media. This is a time of unlimited creative opportunities that increasingly demand brand flexibility because of the "Rubik's Cube" of choices in channel management. The simple fact is, though business communications are becoming more complex, they are also becoming more efficient and effective when done right. Besides, nearly anyone can enforce guidelines but only truly strategic and creative professionals drive evolution and innovation.

Constancy of Purpose

This paper does not attempt to position brand consistency as an "either/or" proposition. Nor is it suggesting one employ a "middle of the road" strategy because you will clearly get run over. Rather the purpose is to demonstrate that enforced and complete compliance to brand guidelines limits strategic and tactical opportunities. Regardless of the intelligence and completeness of any brand strategy, it will be incapable of anticipating everything or reacting immediately to rapidly changing market conditions. The day brand strategies are set or guidelines are issued, they are out of date.

Rather than expecting rigid compliance, organizations must establish a new approach and mind-set. This approach is Constancy of Purpose. As outlined earlier, there are three critical attributes of "great" brands which support the notion of being constant in purpose:

- Built from a single great idea.
- Hold true to their core purpose.
- Employ brand as the central organizing principle of the business.

Historically, consistency has had two meanings in branding. First, it refers to the implementation of a brand's visual identity and tone of voice across all customer touch points. BMW is perhaps the best example of a brand whose visual identity and tone of voice are implemented consistently around the world – from the correct placement of its logo to the correct design format of its dealerships.

Second, consistency is a qualitative and quantitative measure of a brand's ability to repeatedly deliver the experience it promises to its customers. For example, Pepsi's product is consistent both over time and internationally, and Apple computers have consistently delivered a user-friendly experience targeted at the creative market.

Constancy of purpose as an approach and mind-set are summed up nicely by Andrew Rolfe of Pret A Manger who shares:

"We're not concerned about having consistency of brand so much as about consistency of purpose that flows throughout the whole organization. It doesn't actually matter what we write on the napkins or say through advertising; all that matters is that when you go into a Pret shop you get that set of experiences that describes Pret."

I have had the pleasure of visiting Pret locations in both London and New York and enjoy the subtle and not-so-subtle differences. The serving personnel in both cities reflect the local culture and both are friendly and endearing in their own unique ways. Basically this approach advocates consistent direction but acknowledges there are infinite large and small touches one can employ to follow that direction when building a brand and interacting with customers.

Constancy of purpose is an emerging brand strategy that capitalizes on the benefits of ubiquity and uniformity while encouraging flexibility to ensure relevance and differentiation without eroding long-term credibility and trust.

70/30 concerns the relative weighting given to the elements that must remain true to the brand's original intent, strategy, and design versus flexibility granted to its managers.

Employing the 70/30 Rule

Constancy of purpose is highly subjective and runs the risk of granting too much freedom to adjust the brand. Like any strategy, it requires oversight and the tacit approval of leadership to be successful. In working with clients across many industries, I have provided a tool that can help guide this approach. This is called the "The 70/30 Rule".

Applied more for context than numerical accuracy, 70/30 concerns the relative weighting given to the elements that must remain true to the brand's original intent, strategy, and design versus flexibility granted to its managers. So think of it as 70% of the brand strategy and guidelines are firm and 30% flexible.

This flexibility includes language and cultural differences, target market variances, buying behavior nuances, and other strategic imperatives when managing a brand. Let us use McDonalds as an example. Their restaurants and locations are very much tailored to local markets, yet, remain true to the global brand. Menu items, uniforms, promotions, and hours of operation are subject to regional conditions in order to attain utmost relevance. This does not mean McDonalds is inconsistent, in fact, it is more successful as it allows freedom within form.

This was not an easy or overnight shift in McDonald's strategy. It represents a change in ethos and culture from an unbending top-down organization to a strategically thoughtful one that encourages and assesses brand deviations to remain highly responsive and competitive in all markets it chooses to compete.

Visit a McDonalds in Japan and you can order a shrimp burger. In France, you will sit in plush seats, enjoy an espresso, and feel unhurried. In the U.K., one can order porridge for breakfast. Without a doubt, you will know and feel you are in a McDonalds but the differences enhance the regional experience.

This approach also allows brands to share and implement best practices market to market, as McDonalds did when it opened its first drive-thru in China in 2005. Jeff Schwartz, CEO of McDonald's China stated at the time, "Drive-Thru is an integral part of McDonald's Plan to Win in China and we are well positioned to expand our Drive-Thru locations in major cities across the country, such as Shanghai, Beijing, Guangzhou and Shenzhen. We want to ensure that as the lifestyles of today's Chinese consumers become more demanding, McDonald's is ready to provide a convenient, efficient and quality solution to satisfy the needs of their fast paced lives."

A relatively new generation flagship restaurant project for McDonalds in the UK takes constancy of purpose farther. This location includes a teenage 'bar' dining area, TV screens, internet and gaming points, comfortable seating, hanging lights, creative graphics and photos on the walls. This signals a clear departure from the bolted down seats in locations all employing the same floor plan all around the world.

Indisputably, one of the key facets of a great brand is that it delivers on consistency. However, this new approach ensures that the core brand promise and its values do not change to any great extent over time, instead, the manifestation of the brand and the way in which the promise and values are communicated are regularly updated and improved. This consistency is absolutely essential for a brand to help keep it fresh, deliver trust and confidence for the consumer, as well as, clarity of purpose and positioning.

The key is to employ brand as a central organizing principle while remaining open to adjustment and renewal.

Summing Up
In this world where customer preference in receipt of brand communication and experience is growing more complex and rapid, absolute consistency often translates to loss of relevance. The impact is quickly felt in financial performance. This does not require developing and fostering a short-term mentality to long-term brand building. Branding still requires consistency over time. The key is to employ brand as a central organizing principle while remaining open to adjustment and renewal.

Constancy of purpose is an emerging brand strategy that capitalizes on the benefits of ubiquity and uniformity while encouraging flexibility to ensure relevance and differentiation without eroding long-term credibility and trust. The 70/30 rule advocated is an attempt to provide tangible guidance and management to achieve constancy of purpose. Both support Nancy Astor's assertion that "the main dangers in this life are the people who want to change everything or nothing."

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