

o The Systemic Brand

Seeing the bigger picture in an interconnected brand scenario

Ray Podder [30-July-2004]

When you change the way you look at things the things you look at change.

Take for instance the dilemma of today's smarter brand marketer. The prior notions about a "brand" being the connector of ideas from the mass marketer to the consuming masses didn't include today's interconnected scenario; and our aspirations couldn't see past ideas like progress equaling mass production, mass consumption of seemingly unlimited resources, and mass marketing. In today's connection economy, the Internet, Tivo, and Instant Messaging have likely nailed the coffin shut on the idea of a "mass-market", where consuming masses supposedly respond like Pavlov's dogs to positioned brand propositions from the mass media.

The other side of it is of course how brands are built and capitalized upon. Human nature is a constant everyone can rely on, and the more we understand how the mind works, the more we think we have control over our market, right? Perhaps that's somewhat true for the time being, but isn't someone's mindset a result of concurring circumstances? How does the marketer control that?

So here's the dilemma: Just because we're at a point of recognizing the irrelevance of thinking like mass marketers, and focusing more on the human aspects brand development, how do we still get past the hurdle of time and place relevance in a dynamic interconnected marketplace?

In our interconnected world, the more we know and can access, the more we can see the holistic and systemic nature of things and how they interrelate. This interactivity seems to be revealing where we are interdependent, and it puts the marketplace as larger system at work, way beyond marketer and customer.

Interestingly, in nature, everything already is systemic. Our whole planet works because its simple, beautiful and elegant systems are all interconnected and all dependent on each other. By contrast, just look at our attempt at solar energy. We waste non-renewable energy to shape limited resources into bulky panels that kind of mimic a crude form of photosynthesis...nowhere near the efficiency of a common leaf! Not to undermine my enormous respect for scientists who've even gotten us to this point, but you see the comparison...nature plain works better.

◉ The Systemic Brand (contd.)

The reason that nature works better is that it always takes this interdependent, interrelated "all-ness" into consideration. "All-ness" referring to unlimited access to everything from knowledge, goods, services, and conversations about all of the above. As we near economic all-ness with an interconnected global marketplace, perhaps nature has a lesson or two for us to learn.

The Emergence of the Systemic Brand

Today's brands already realize the irrelevance of the one-to-many communication paradigm like broadcasting. However, smart, networked markets require more than shifting media focus, they require examining the propositions that brands currently build their value on. The promise of efficient and sustainable one-to-one brand marketing point to a need for realizing where we fit and how we connect to each other in the marketplace.

The business world is already adjusting to this. Competitive pressure mapping systems are moving from trickle down theories to cyclical ones. We once believed that the big companies competed with each other for one market, the mid-sized served the market that the big guys didn't want, and small businesses got leftovers from both. Today, it's all up for grabs, and even the smallest of players can have a formidable presence in the market system. Jet Blue in the airline industry provides a perfect case.

Competition based on a scarcity has also undergone a paradigm shift. Unprecedented access and mass customization leads brands to collaborate with former competitors to serve overlapping dynamic markets. Having Starbucks at the Vons supermarket helps rather than hinders the supermarket business.

In the workplace, top-down command and control management practices are rapidly becoming déclassé. Entrepreneurial individuals and workgroups are more productive and more empowered, as the phenomenal success of enterprise social networking software can testify.

Brands emerging in this environment can't afford to be anything but systemic. A systemic brand derives its value from the power of its connections, and not by the polish of its positioning.

o The Systemic Brand (contd.)

For example, suppose that you are a travel-related brand. The traditional approach to building your brand may be to focus exclusively on the traveler and try to understand their mindset so that you can effectively market to them right? The concept of "targeting" as if to assault and manipulate in a war-like manner the minds of the very people who sustain you might seem silly intellectually, but how else do you make your quarterly quota?

The identical scenario for a systemic brand first asks some new questions.

Questions like which other activities enhance travel? Who else is already reaching the same people that would benefit from my brand's value? What kinds of paths already exist that reach these people with the least amount of effort? Why do they need to travel in the first place? Where do markets that also serve our customers intersect with us? How can we evangelize our brand at those intersection points efficiently?

Questions like these allow us to discover for example, that an increase in communication is directly proportional to the increase in the desire to travel. Such observations allow for branding initiatives that support communication brands that serve the customers in our same market system. We benefit another brand who benefit customers who benefit us...a simplistic example to be sure, but it's one that illustrates the inclusive efficiency of the systemic brand. Just like a natural interdependent ecosystem, our customer's interdependence on motivating factors can be revealed when we start to think this way.

A systemic brand allows us to collaborate with the right partner brands, philanthropic, and market systems. It's no longer supplier against consumer or limited markets defining opposing competitors, but more like ongoing exchanges between what's needed now to enhance the supply or the demand side and under what circumstance. Everything can potentially benefit each other, and everything has the potential of self-sabotage by disregarding the actual system at play.

That may sound vague, but it is actually more specific than how we've been looking at brand marketing to date. Even the idea that "marketing" is a necessary action is in question here. If we are approaching a truly interconnected paradigm of civilization, then isn't realizing the significance of each customer and each marketer within the bigger market system more important?

◉ The Systemic Brand (contd.)

Just ask yourself, what combination of the following information is most relevant is establishing a true connection between your customer and you:

HOW somebody behaves in a certain place and time so that you can react to them in that context?

WHY you think they are behaving that way?

Or is it interdependence of WHAT connects them to that decision, so that you can engage in a real, relevant conversation with them in the marketplace?

For tomorrows brand stewards of the interconnected marketplace, perhaps the way to look at how, what and why is purely **systemic**.

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Ray Podder is an entrepreneur, brand strategist and designer with a unique focus to help companies build on ideas that their customers can connect and grow with. With over a decade's experience as a unique thinker, he helps companies develop inventive business cultures to produce stronger brands with leaner use of their resources.