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Building a human brand: Brand anthropomorphism unravelled

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Abstract Brand anthropomorphism has been found to enhance the ability of consumers to recognize the inherent value of brands. However, there is limited knowledge among practitioners on how to build a brand with humanlike characteristics. After a literature review of brand anthropomorphism in general and the theory of warmth and competence in particular, we present the Human Brand Model of how to build a brand that is perceived to be human. There are four steps in this process; the first three indicate the brand inputs and the last indicates the results of those inputs. This model guides brand managers on how to make their brand more human. The use of this model should result in the organization having an excellent brand reputation; stronger, more meaningful relationships with its customers; and improved brand loyalty.
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1. The need for anthropomorphism in branding

Brands create value for organizations. One way of enhancing that value is through brand anthropomorphism. This article sets out to decipher whether the notion of a human brand is a fanciful fabrication or an idea that has both academic and practical significance. Due to a rebirth of traditional, wholesome values, consumers are growing increasingly fond of humanized brands and now even relate to brands in the same way they relate to people (Brown, 2010). Brands that succeed in times when brand trust is low are those that foster meaningful relationships with customers by coming across as human (Kervyn, Fiske, & Malone, 2012). Ascribing humanlike attributes to brands (i.e., brand anthropomorphism) has been found to enhance consumers' ability to recognize the inherent values of a brand (Morhart, Malär, Guèvremont, Girardin, & Grohmann, 2015). A need for more authentic, humanlike brands can also be attributed to the fact that consumers today relate to brands in the same

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way they relate to people (Fournier, 1998). The social standards that govern interpersonal relationships between people now appear in the relationships between people and brands (Aggarwal, 2004).

According to Brown (2010), the appeal of using anthropomorphism in marketing is poorly understood. Brand managers need a greater mastery of brand anthropomorphism and how they should build and manage the human brand. The objectives of this article are (1) to advance our practical knowledge of brand anthropomorphism expressed through perceived warmth and competence in brands and (2) to develop a framework that will aid practitioners in the development of human brands. We first discuss brand anthropomorphism, followed by the theory of warmth and competence. Then, we present how to build the human brand, along with a model of the human brand.

2. What is brand anthropomorphism?

Anthropomorphism refers to the attribution of humanlike characteristics, motivations, intentions, and emotions to nonhuman entities (Epley, Waytz, & Cacioppo, 2007). Academic research on the anthropomorphism of brands first became prevalent with the brand personality framework, which deals with inference of human personality traits onto brands (Aaker, 1997). Since then, there has been ongoing work on brand anthropomorphism, including further studies on brand personality (Aaker, Fournier, & Brasel, 2004) and interrelated concepts such as consumer-brand relationships (Fournier, 1998, 2009) and brand love (Batra, Ahuvia, & Bagozzi, 2012). Fournier (1998) found that people relate to brands in the same way as they relate to other people, and even have relationships with them. Today, this idea is widely accepted in marketing (Fournier & Alvarez, 2012). More recently, brand anthropomorphism has been studied in relation to brand perception (Kervyn et al., 2012).

Kim and McGill (2011) posited that there are two types of brand anthropomorphism. The first is analogical in nature, in which schematic indicators are used to create cognitive associations with human characteristics. For example, a brand that meets customer expectations is perceived as trustworthy. The quality of trustworthiness—usually reserved for people—makes the brand seem more human. Theories on brand personality belong in this first category (Kim & McGill, 2011). Aaker's (1997) well-known brand personality scale identified five traits of brand personality: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness. There are strong similarities between sincerity and warmth (Kervyn et al., 2012). With this first type of brand anthropomorphism, human qualities are simply observable traits in the brand (Kim & McGill, 2011). This notion that brands can be infused with humanlike traits is no longer questioned in academic research (Bennett & Hill, 2012).

Kim and McGill (2011) stated that the second form of anthropomorphism in marketing takes consumers a step closer to really believing that a brand is human. In this instance, the brand is perceived as having a humanlike mental state (Kim & McGill, 2011). An anthropomorphized brand is a palpable entity with senses, goals, a mentality, a temper, and even an appetite for power (Fournier & Alvarez, 2012). Puzakova, Kwak, and Rocereto (2009, p. 413) referred to anthropomorphized brands as having "various emotional states, mind, soul and conscious behaviors." In brand anthropomorphism of this nature, the consumer starts to view the brand as having a deep capacity for care and concern (i.e., warmth) (Kim & McGill, 2011). Brands that can achieve this make it far easier for consumers to draw real comparisons between their interpersonal relationships and their relationships with brands (Kim & McGill, 2011; Malone & Fiske, 2013). Just as they do with people, it has become clear that consumers relate to and evaluate brands. Brand managers need to actively manage this.

3. The theory of warmth and competence

The Stereotype Content Model (SCM), a well-established model from social psychology (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2007), provides a theoretical framework to better understand the humanization of brands. Kervyn et al. (2012) utilized this model as the basis for their study of the way in which consumers perceive, feel about, and relate to brands. The SCM states that people form social perceptions about others based on the evaluation of two dimensions: warmth and competence (Cuddy et al., 2007, 2008; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002). *Warmth* is felt when one perceives another to have good intentions, and *competence* is felt when one perceives another to have the ability to carry out those intentions (Fiske et al., 2002). According to Cuddy et al. (2008), warmth traits include being good-natured, trustworthy, tolerant, friendly, and sincere; while competence traits include being capable, skillful, intelligent, and confident. Aaker, Vohs, and Mogilner (2010) posed this question: Do people then evaluate brands on the same basis of warmth and competence?
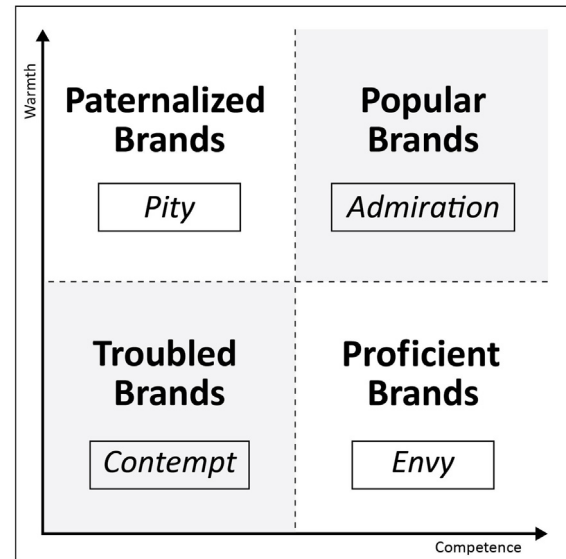
4. Warmth and competence in brands

Warmth and competence are said to enhance brand anthropomorphism, making brands more relatable to consumers (Fournier & Alvarez, 2012). Warmth in brands is felt if the brand is perceived to have good intentions; competence is felt if the brand is believed to have the ability and skills to carry out those intentions (Kervyn et al., 2012). According to Malone and Fiske (2013), warmth as it relates to brands can be measured on the basis of perceived traits including being friendly, likable, trustworthy, honest, and sincere; competence can be measured on the basis of perceived traits including capability, intelligence, and skill. Popular human brands that display both warmth and competence include Coca-Cola, Hershey's, and Johnson & Johnson. These brands have strong relationships with customers and enjoy high brand loyalty (Fournier, 2009; Fournier & Alvarez, 2012). As previously stated, research supports the idea that consumers evaluate brands based on expressions of warmth and competence (Malone & Fiske, 2013). Kervyn et al. (2012) developed a theoretical framework that can be used to understand this better.

5. Brand perceptions of warmth and competence

Kervyn et al. (2012) developed an adaptation of the SCM (Cuddy et al., 2007) referred to as the Brands as Intentional Agents Framework (BIAF). This theoretical framework explains three aspects of brand perception as they relate to warmth and competence: the evaluative dimensions, and the corresponding emotional and behavioral responses. The BIAF employs a two-by-two matrix with four quadrants that illustrate four possible combinations of warmth-by-competence in brands. For the evaluation of brands and not people, the BIAF refers to intentions (warmth) and ability (competence). This is done to emphasize the intention and ability of a corporate entity rather than a person. We adapted the BIAF's four quadrants as illustrated in Figure 1: cold-incompetent (troubled brands), cold-competent (proficient brands), warm-incompetent (paternalized brands), and warm-competent (popular brands). According to consumer perceptions, brands can then be located in the appropriate quadrant. The BIAF also shows the potential emotional consumer responses of perceived warmth and competence in brands; they are the same as those of interpersonal relationships. As with people, cold-incompetent brands elicit contempt, cold-

Figure 1. Theory on the Brands as Intentional Agents Framework (BIAF)

Source: Adapted from Kervyn et al. (2012)

competent brands elicit envy, warm-incompetent brands elicit pity, and warm-competent brands elicit admiration. However, the behavioral outcomes of warmth and competence in brands differ from those of interpersonal relationships. The BIAF posits that purchase intent and brand loyalty are two consumer behavioral outcomes of warmth and competence in brands.

Brands that are perceived as high in both warmth and competence are said to belong to the 'golden quadrant,' evoking the highest levels of admiration and consumer loyalty (Aaker, Garbinsky, & Vohs, 2012; Zawisza & Pittard, 2015). Consumers view these brands as having both positive intentions and sound ability. At the opposite end of the spectrum, brands that are perceived as cold-incompetent because of negative publicity or misbehavior (e.g., BP, Volkswagen) are considered troubled brands. Brands that are perceived as competent but cold (e.g., BMW, HP) are considered envied brands. Brands that are perceived as warm but incompetent (e.g., public transport brands, NGOs) are considered paternalized brands. Aaker et al. (2010) confirmed this in their study of nonprofit versus for-profit brands, where nonprofit brands were viewed as more warm than competent.

The BIAF is a useful and practical brand management tool that provides guidance for brand managers wishing to understand the humanization of brands (Fournier & Alvarez, 2012). Kervyn et al. (2012) argued that the framework can be used to present a landscape of perceptions so that brands can be compared. In psychology, stereotype groups consistently—even across cultures—and in the

same quadrant of the SCM and BIAS map (Cuddy et al., 2007, 2008). Similarly, Kervyn et al. (2012) proposed that certain stereotype or model brands will unfailingly belong to a specific quadrant of the BIAF.

5.1. Creating golden quadrant brands

In today's climate of significant consumer skepticism and decreased brand trust, cultivation of admiration through expressions of warmth and competence is needed now more than ever (Aaker et al., 2012). A study of the world's most admired brands by Fortune Magazine (2015) provides insight regarding what it takes to build golden quadrant brands. Admired brands exhibit warm and competent traits: people management (warmth); social responsibility (warmth); quality of products, services, and management (competence); and financial security (competence). Some examples of the most admired brands in the world include Google, Apple, and Southwest Airlines (Aaker et al., 2012). Southwest Airlines is known for putting customers' interests first, and this is a clear display of its warmth (Lantieri & Chiagouris, 2009).

5.2. Outcomes of perceived warmth and competence

According to the BIAF, the behavioral outcomes of warmth and competence in brands include purchase intent and brand loyalty (Kervyn et al., 2012). Other behavioral outcomes of warmth and competence include increased consumer engagement and connection (Aaker et al., 2012), word-of-mouth and brand advocacy (Andrei & Zait, 2014), positive brand attitudes and intentions (Ivens et al., 2015), commitment (Hess & Story, 2005), and brand trust (Lau & Lee, 1999; Li et al., 2008).

There is debate about whether warmth or competence is the stronger driver of positive consumer behavior. In online networking, Andrei and Zait (2014) found warmth to be a stronger driver of online brand advocacy and competence to be more impactful in driving purchase intent. Aaker et al. (2012) concluded that nonprofit brands should focus on competence, but on the condition that the brand was already perceived as predominantly warm.

Zawisza and Pittard (2015) argued that either dimension can be the stronger driver of purchase intent and that this depends entirely on the context in which the purchase is made. Factors include whether the product purchased is a high involvement or low involvement product. The level of consumer anxiety at the time of purchase could

also have an influence. The type of advertising appeal could highlight warmth or competence (or both). It has been suggested that the golden quadrant no longer refers to the highest levels of warmth and competence, but to their optimal levels within a specific context or market segment (Zawisza & Pittard, 2015). Bennett and Hill (2012) and Kervyn et al. (2012) found warmth and competence to be equally important. Consumers form judgments about brands so heavily based on warmth and competence that these dimensions collectively accounted for almost 50% of consumer loyalty, purchase intent, and likelihood to recommend (Kervyn et al., 2012; Malone & Fiske, 2013).

Warmth and competence also relate to other constructs such as brand reputation (Aaker et al., 2010). A brand's reputation is based on consumer evaluation of various aspects of the organization, including warmth and competence attributes. When the consumer believes that the brand has his/her best interests at heart (warmth), the brand reputation signals trustworthiness (Aaker et al., 2010). Brand competence is evaluated on the basis of quality, reliability, durability, and consistency (Kervyn et al., 2012). Brands develop competent reputations when consumers perceive a high-value offering (Devine & Halpern, 2001). In order to achieve good brand reputation, managers need to understand how to build a human brand.

Fournier and Alvarez (2012) argued that advancing the theories of the BIAF requires shedding light on the tools and processes that can be used to enhance perceptions of warmth and competence in brands. The marketing mix, organizational values, and employee behavior can all be better used for this purpose (Fournier & Alvarez, 2012).

The aim of this article is to build a greater understanding of brand anthropomorphism in general and the theory of warmth and competence in particular. Brands that portray themselves as humanlike are more likely to succeed. Toward this end, we propose a model that helps practitioners build a human brand, and provide guidelines that detail how to construct and manage the human brand.

6. How to build the human brand

One of the objectives of this article is to establish the exact tools that are required to build a human brand. The insights are packaged into a simple model that outlines the key steps in this intricate process. This model is referred to as the Human Brand Model (HBM) and is shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2.   The Human Brand Model (HBM)
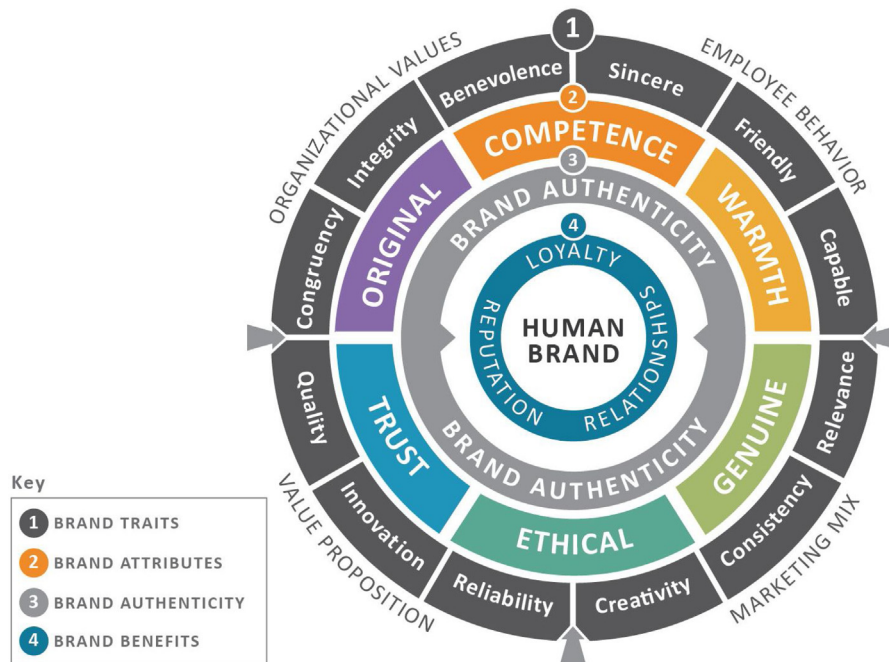
The HBM is a graphic representation of what is required to build a brand that is perceived as human. There are four stages in this process; the first three indicate the brand inputs and the fourth indicates the consequences of those actions, or the brand benefits. Four concentric circles depict the four important stages of building a human brand. The outer three are outlined next.

6.1. Brand traits

The outermost circle of the HBM depicts the brand traits that are required for the brand to be perceived as human. The management team must actively harness a number of brand traits that span organizational values, employee behavior, marketing mix, and value proposition. Constructing these traits is the first step in the process of building a human brand, and can be the most difficult and time-consuming. It should be a key part of the brand strategy formulation as this is normally where the brand identity is discussed. To ensure success, executives from every department should be involved in the process, not only marketing and brand managers.

First, congruency, integrity, and benevolence must be included in the organizational values. These are all important brand traits that are perceived as human. Congruency is perceived when the brand displays a deep commitment to its values by ensuring that those values are reflected in its

actions. Integrity is noticed when the brand displays a deep commitment to the best interests of its customers, holding customers' interests even above its own and at the heart of the organization. Integrity is conveyed through transparent, responsible, and accountable behavior. Benevolence is detected when the brand displays a deep commitment to the welfare of the community and society that it serves. The brand conveys its benevolence through meaningful and sustainable corporate social investment, which aligns with the brand values. Collectively, these traits demonstrate a commitment to brand values, customers, the local community, and society.

Second, employee behavior must reinforce the warmth and competence of the brand. All employees—including leadership—must come across as sincere, friendly, and capable. Sincerity is discerned through natural, truthful, and honest behavior. To set an example, employees must be guided by authentic leadership and behavior that adheres to a moral code of conduct. Friendliness is perceived through brand citizenship behavior. Friendly employees are willing to go out of their way to help not only customers, but also fellow employees. Finally, to develop capable employees, it is important that they are empowered with skills and entrusted with the ability to make decisions. The ability to make decisions directly translates to employees being able to solve problems efficiently and effectively, and reinforces the value promise.

This task would normally be the function of human resources, with input from the marketing department and operations management. It may take the form of an internal brand management program that aims to increase the brand citizenship behavior of employees through ongoing training and skills development.

Third, the marketing department and brand management should be responsible for development of the marketing mix. Three traits must come across in the strategic marketing and communications of the organization: creativity, consistency, and relevance. Creativity in marketing is key to developing a brand that is considered unique and different among its competitors. To embrace creativity, the marketing team must be open to new ideas and even willing to take calculated risks. Consistency in the marketing mix can take various forms. It includes consistency in brand communications—from visual identity to marketing messages—and long-term continuity of the brand. Finally, relevance is very important. A brand that enjoys significance is one that creates real meaning for its customers, and is ultimately perceived as authentic.

Fourth, the value proposition is the unique offering that will entice customers to choose one brand over another. In a human brand, the value proposition should be executed according to three guiding principles: quality, innovation, and reliability. Quality is conveyed by an offering that meets extremely high and stringent criteria. To ensure this, product development and service design teams must be detail oriented and enforce robust quality control. Brands that are perceived as original do so by showing a tangible commitment to innovation. To drive innovation, they show an openness to bold, new ideas; they hire the most sought-after creative talent; and they invest in the latest technology. Finally, reliability is fundamental to building a human brand. Reliability is sensed when the brand repeatedly delivers on its value promise and customers can count on the brand. Human brands solicit customer feedback on a regular basis and use that feedback to strengthen the value proposition.

The whole process requires someone to lead it, perhaps the Chief Brand Officer at corporate level, but there also must be support and input from executive leadership of the entire organization. Ultimately, customers should experience a human brand at every brand contact point, so these brand traits span four different areas: organizational values, employee behavior, the marketing mix, and value proposition. Again, this is why it is so important to have the support of every department.

6.2. Brand attributes

The brand traits will enhance six human brand attributes: original, ethical, genuine, warmth, competence, and trust. The original attribute is the brand differentiating itself from competitors through a novel approach to brand positioning. It is conveyed through creativity and innovation, as well as by creating contextual significance and a distinct identity for the brand. The competence attribute in brands is understood as the degree to which the consumer believes that a brand has the required skills and knowledge to deliver on its promise. The ethical attribute is the measure of honesty, responsibility, and accountability of a brand and the extent to which it keeps its promises. Warmth as an attribute is the belief that the brand has good intentions and acts in consumers' best interests. The genuine attribute is the brand being natural, real, true, and not an imitation—in other words, authentic. Trust as an attribute is judged according to whether the consumer believes the brand would act in his/her best interests, and whether the brand can fulfill its promise toward them.

The second circle depicts the six human brand attributes that result from building the brand traits in step one. Many of the brand traits enhance more than one attribute at a time. Table 1 demonstrates which brand traits enhance which brand attribute.

For example, to create the perception of a brand that is perceived as warm, the brand manager should build a number of brand traits: friendliness (through a helpful and kind attitude), benevolence (through a tangible commitment to customers, the community, and society in general), sincerity (through behavior that is natural and truthful, and honest and authentic leadership), and integrity (through a genuine commitment to the best interests of the customer). The most important point to note about building a human brand is that the six attributes are all deeply connected. This means that no single attribute can be ignored, as they impact one another. If one attribute is enhanced, the others will be perceived more favorably. However, if one is tarnished, the others will be negatively impacted.

6.3. Brand authenticity

The third circle depicts the final step in building a human brand: ensuring that the brand is viewed as authentic. Harnessing the brand traits and attributes will surely drive the perception of authenticity, but the final requirement is delivering on the brand

Table 1. Human brand traits by human brand attributes

Brand Traits	Brand Attributes					
	Original	Ethical	Genuine	Warmth	Competence	Trust
Congruency		✔	✔			✔
Integrity		✔	✔	✔		✔
Benevolence		✔	✔	✔		✔
Sincere		✔	✔	✔		✔
Friendly			✔	✔		
Capable					✔	✔
Creativity	✔				✔	
Consistency		✔	✔		✔	✔
Relevance	✔		✔			✔
Quality			✔		✔	✔
Innovation	✔					
Reliability		✔			✔	✔

✔ = The human brand trait (left) contributes to enhancing the human brand attribute (top)

promise at every contact point. Authentic brands make it their core business to deliver to their customers. In addition, it is important to note that consumers co-create the meaning of brand authenticity according to their own interpretations of what is genuine, sincere, real, and true (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010). What is authentic to some may not be authentic to others. However, we suggest that they are likely to view the brand as authentic when all six brand attributes are present. Authenticity is an integral component of humanized brands and the management team must continuously ensure this for customers.

7. Brand benefits

As the result of building traits and attributes, as well as making the brand authentic, the brand experiences a number of valuable benefits. Consumers perceive the brand to have a good reputation; they have improved customer-brand relationships and increased brand loyalty. These are the ultimate benefits of having a human brand. Reputation is a result of stakeholder images of the brand over time. The more human the brand is perceived to be by customers and other stakeholders, the greater the chance of its brand reputation being favorable. In addition, consumers are more likely to want to have a relationship with the brand. Another benefit of making the brand more human is the likelihood of increasing consumer loyalty, an important criterion for increased sales through repeat purchases.

The HBM provides an outline of how human brands can be built at a practical level. Although all departments in an organization are involved in its development, the Chief Brand Officer or the Chief Marketing Officer at a corporate level should drive it. The best-case scenario is that with time and practice, the philosophies of the HBM become so entrenched that its implementation becomes second nature to leadership and the entire organization.

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