

# The BRAND Ultimatum

By Denise Lee Yohn

**T**he secrets to a successful brand extension are sought as fervently as the Holy Grail. With a dismal 50% success rate (according to David Taylor's *Brand Stretch*, Wiley Publishing, 2004), marketers eagerly dissect each failed extension with the hopes of uncovering how they can ensure their next move ends up on the win side of the scoreboard.

Most brand extensions analyses focus on the product category that the brand is being extended into, and that category's fit—or lack thereof—with the brand. In the most recent edition of its annual *Top Brand Extensions* survey, consultancy Tipping Sprung identifies three spin-offs that “least fit the brand's core values” (Sylvester Stallone pudding, Harley-Davidson cake-decorating kit, and Everlast fragrance line, in case you're wondering). Similarly, in *Focus: The Future of Your Company Depends on It* (HarperCollins Business, 1997), marketing guru Al Ries blames extension failures on categories that are too disparate, explaining that “names have power, but only in the camp in which they have credentials and when they get out of their camp, when they lose focus, they also lose their power.”

## EXECUTIVE briefing

A credible and compelling brand extension is driven by a deep brand identity—an identity with associations that are profound and multi-layered. Like a hero who headlines a blockbuster movie, a brand must captivate its audience's imagination. And like hit sequels that feed on the desire to know more about the hero, successful brand extensions satisfy their targets' appetites for more information and innovation.

Brand fit certainly factors into the fate of an extension, but these analyses overlook the litmus test—the depth of the brand itself. In order for a brand extension to be credible and compelling, it must be driven by a deep brand identity.

### Brand Depth

If a brand identity is a unique set of brand associations that define what the brand stands for, then a deep brand identity is one with associations that are profound and multi-layered.

McDonald's provides an illuminating example. From its heritage of creating phenomena (like the "fast food culture" and breakfast on the go), to its multiple personas (international ambassador, fun playmate, low-income job provider, America's babysitter, and so forth), to its frequent reinvention (the fun fast feeder in the 1960s, the solution for working women in the 1970s, the menu innovator in the 1980s and 1990s, and trying today to be the responsible corporate citizen)—the McDonald's brand is a deep one. It has a transcendent identity that connects with people on multiple levels, some of them more meaningful than we might care to admit.

Importantly, a brand doesn't have to be deep in order to be strong. Southwest Airlines, Target, and Volvo are examples of brands enjoying strong brand equity built from unaffected, sophisticatedly simple identities.

Brand depth is, however, a prerequisite for successful brand extensions. The rich, multiple layers of associations conveyed by a deep brand identity provide the fodder for extensions that make sense.

A brand identity is like a character in a story—a brand identity with depth is like a character whose narrative has many layers to unpeel. Like a hero who headlines a blockbuster movie, a brand must captivate its audience's imagination—and subsequent incarnations (that is, extensions) should feed on its audience's desire to know more about it.

### Sequels and Extensions

In a *New York Times* article ("Sequels: Stay Fresh or Die Hard," August 26, 2007), Jeannette Catsoulis offered an insightful analysis of why only three of the nine movie sequels released in the 2007 summer season were winners at the box office and among critics. Her point of view provides an important perspective for marketers considering extending their brands.

Citing examples such as "The Bourne Ultimatum" and "Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix," Catsoulis attrib-

uted sequels' successes to the way they "advanced their narratives while remaining true to their protagonist's previously defined character."

Beginning in "The Bourne Identity," she explained, the main character Jason Bourne embarks on a journey of self-discovery. Through the story that unfolds across the three Bourne films, the audience is drawn further into the hero's quest for self-knowledge—with each installment revealing enough of his story to satisfy our curiosity, but leaving enough unresolved to prompt palatable anticipation for the next one.

Similarly, Harry Potter has grown up through his five eponymous movies. The franchise's audience has been captivated by the continually unfolding uncertainties of Harry's identity and his relationships.

In the context of brand extensions, the continually unfolding story of the Nike brand is as captivating as Jason's or Harry's. Back in the 1960s, coach Bill Bowerman and runner Phil Knight created a brand intended to be an inspirer and innovator for all athletes. This brand identity has progressed, throughout the company's prolific extensions, from the way Nike enabled kids to "be like Mike" (with the Jordan brand collection launch in 1997) to its more recent create-your-own-shoe brand NIKEiD (which invites customers to become co-innovators).

The recent addition of Nike+ is perhaps the richest example of how the brand's narrative is advanced through extension. By combining music, personal coaching, and fitness networking, Nike is at once revolutionizing the running experience and revealing another dimension of its brand identity as an inspirer and innovator. For some, Nike's next move is as anticipated as their favorite superhero's might be.

Dove, the personal care brand, provides a different example of a brand with extensions subscribing to the approach of successful movie sequels. Dove seems to feed into its users' desires to see the brand achieve its full potential, the way moviegoers eagerly awaited Harry Potter's coming-of-age.

As a protagonist for a new definition of beauty, the Dove brand started campaigning with its original soap products four years ago. As it has extended into skin care, hair care, and deodorants, Dove has continued its crusade against unrealistic expectations of beauty. But instead of simply restating the same message over and over again, the brand has developed into a more enlightened position—evolving from somewhat defensive self-affirmation (an original ad featured a heavysset woman in a defiant pose) to more proactive self-

Hollywood's lessons  
are lessons for brand  
marketers, too.



empowerment (a current ad encourages women to “make the hair you have the hair you’ve always wanted”). Dove’s extensions have been so well-received partially because its brand identity has matured through them.

## Failures

On the flip side, Catsoulis criticized “Ocean’s Thirteen” (the last installment in the “Ocean’s Eleven” franchise) for trying to enliven a “stagnant antihero” with “interchangeable scenarios.” Likable as Danny Ocean might be, sometimes there are characters—and brand identities—we don’t want or need to unpeel.

Southwest Airlines’ “fun” brand identity is compelling and meaningful in its own rite. It’s not deep, and that’s OK. In fact, its straightforwardness is its appeal. The leaders at Southwest seem to understand the nature of their brand, and have grown their business by preserving its integrity.

Unfortunately, some marketers fail to recognize a brand’s lack of depth or they try to overcompensate for it. They pursue extensions that simply tell the same brand story in a different category—and often it’s not a story consumers want to hear again in the first place.

The failure of Harley-Davidson’s notorious cake-decorating kit brand extension had little to do with the lack of fit between bikes and butter cream. Nor did it reflect a lack of brand equity. The extension failed because of the depth of the Harley brand identity—or rather, the lack of it.

The Harley brand is already completely understood; there is no more brand story to tell. It has a rich and powerful identity but, colloquially speaking, there is no more “more” there. Seeking out novel categories into which to extend the brand ultimately makes the new products seem formulaic and forced.

## Assess Brand Depth

So before you head down the brand extension path, I recommend you first determine whether or not your brand has the depth of identity necessary to fuel compelling extensions. Such an assessment involves examining your brand along four dimensions that continue to draw upon the analogy of brand as story character:

- dynamic vs. static
- symbolic vs. literal
- mysterious vs. straightforward
- momentum vs. maturity

**Dynamic or static?** Dynamic story characters are those who undergo some sort of change—a change in understanding (of themselves or of the world) or motivation (the purpose or cause they pursue). Static characters, in contrast, remain basically unchanged throughout a work. Whether round or flat, these characters’ identities remain essentially stable throughout the course of the story.

Brands are dynamic or static as well. Dove has adopted a platform that has evolved over time (as noted previously),

whereas Ivory has had a consistent identity for 130 years. A dynamic brand is a deep one.

Ask yourself if the strength of your brand is derived from its flexibility and adaptations over time, or from its consistency and single-mindedness. Does it make sense to evolve your identity to reflect changing cultural patterns or shifting contexts—or is your brand identity timeless and self-referential? If it’s dynamic, brand extensions are going to be more logical and credible.

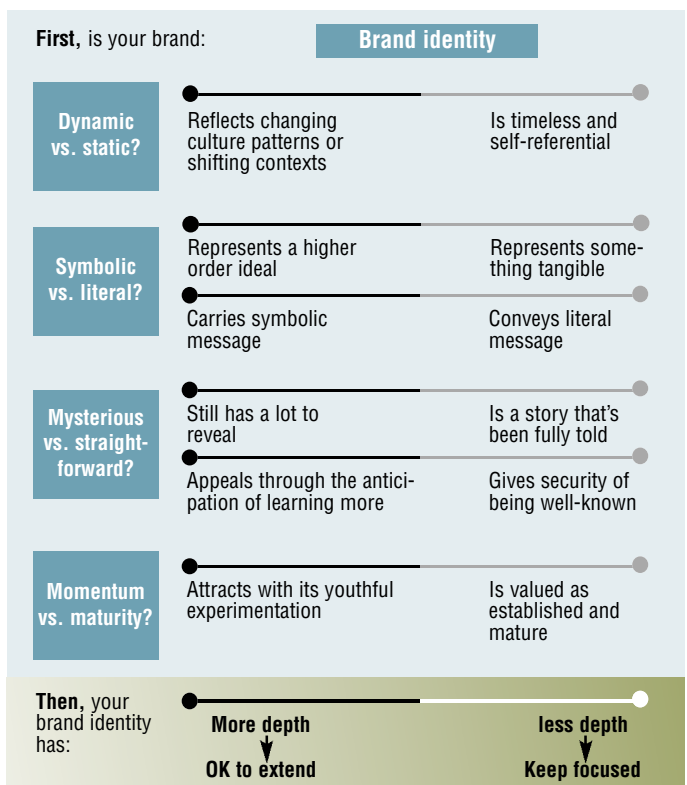
**Symbolic or literal?** Symbolism plays an important role for some characters. King Aragorn in *The Lord of the Rings* represents the Savior who Christians believe is Jesus Christ. Whether or not watchers are aware of this symbolism, they are drawn to the character by a sense that there’s something more to the story of the initially reluctant and somewhat unlikely leader. Other characters are more literal: Think Maximus, the protagonist played by Russell Crowe in “Gladiator.” Importantly, both characters are seductive in their own right—it’s the nature of their identities that distinguishes them.

## ■ Exhibit 1

Using tactical accelerators over the customer life cycle

### To extend or not to extend

A successful brand extension depends on a deep brand identity. **First**, plot where your brand lies on these scales. **Then** you can determine if you should extend the brand or keep it focused.



Similarly brands can be desirable because they stand for something more meaningful or because they are more literal. When Apple issued the cry to “think different,” it was calling people to embrace higher-order values such as individuality and freedom. The symbolic nature of the Apple brand has provided a firm foundation for its broad footprint. Conversely, the BMW brand identity as “the ultimate driving machine” is literal—it’s what you experience when you drive one. The company has wisely chosen to pursue departures from this literal brand identity with different brands (e.g., Mini Cooper).

When considering a brand extension strategy, assess the nature of your brand identity. Does it seek to represent a higher order ideal or carry a symbolic message? Or, does it represent something more tangible and convey a literal message? Symbolic brand identities tend to be deeper and more extend-

## A deep brand identity is neither inherently good nor bad; it’s what you want to do with your brand that matters.

able; companies with literal ones are better off pursuing new growth through new brands.

**Mysterious or straightforward?** Mystery vs. straightforwardness is another dimension of brand identity to consider. Characters who are not who they initially appear to be generally are more extendable than those who are simply who they say they are. How many of us have been captivated by a cliffhanger that suggests that the true identity of the hero or the villain is still unknown? Our appetites for a sequel are whetted just as the credits begin to roll.

Brands with some mystery to them whet consumers’ appetites for extensions. As I observed previously, Nike’s success is due in part to the continual revealing of new facets of its brand identity. Each extension they introduce has an element of surprise—whether an unconventional design or message or both. There is a mysterious quality to Nike.

On the other hand, some brands espouse a more straightforward identity. Southwest is fun; Volvo is safe. These brands are clear and direct; mystery would actually be a negative for them. And because their identities don’t have a lot of depth, they should (and do) have narrow ranges of offerings.

When examining your brand, consider where it lies on the continuum between mystery and straightforwardness—is there more to reveal about your brand or is its story fully told? Do consumers anticipate learning more about you or do they prefer the security of knowing you well now? You should extend only if mystique and intrigue are intrinsic to your brand identity.

Momentum or Maturity? The subject’s maturity is a consideration for storylines and extensions alike. Ongoing coming-of-age stories lend themselves to sequels; brands that seem to have momentum lend themselves to extensions. Google is a great example of a brand that seems to be growing up before our eyes. It has captivated many people with a thought: “What will they think of next?” While Google is a relatively new brand, that doesn’t mean older brands can’t seem as though they are always evolving and maturing. Brands such as Sony and HP have identities born out of discovery and (re)invention, and therefore have successfully extended into new categories.

Typically brands that are—or are perceived to be—more mature are less extendable. Tide is a notable exception, but generally a brand’s maturity works against its ability to develop new perceptions. Take Harley-Davidson: As noted previously, Harley has a well-established brand identity, but not necessarily a deep one.

A deep brand identity provides the fodder needed to create a successful brand extension. Does your brand attract people with its youthful experimentation? Or, have most people already grown up with your brand and now see it as an established mature one? Ask yourself whether or not your brand has enough momentum to enter new categories.

An important note is needed here: Extensions are not the only way for mature brands to invigorate and leverage their brand equity. New approaches in media and messaging generate fresh appeal and salience. Building your brand with new segments or identifying new touchpoints through which to experience your brand can produce new business growth.

### Brand Identity as Bellwether

This brings me back to the main point. A deep brand identity is neither inherently good nor bad; it’s what you want to do with your brand that matters. Just as some great movies shouldn’t have been serialized, brand extensions don’t make sense for all brands. Marketers should examine the depth of a brand’s identity and determine whether or not its narrative has the seductively generative quality necessary to sustain extensions.

If it doesn’t, extensions put the brand at risk of becoming more stale and predictable than the fat jokes and fart gags of the Shrek movie franchise—if that’s possible. ■

### About the Author

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