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# Beyond Empty Branding: Creating Meaningful Brands in a Post-Covid World

# Insights for Hospitality Practitioners

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## Insights for Hospitality Practitioners



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Covid-19 has been a watershed moment in recent human history. While causing unprecedented turbulence and chaos both economically and socially, the pandemic has cemented the place of brands as a source of permanence and stability in our lives. Brands like Zoom, Netflix, and Purell have become household mainstays; reminders of the "new normal" (Vena, 2020). While customer behavior has undoubtedly changed during the pandemic, requiring marketing leaders to adapt at a tactical level (Arora, Dahlstrom, Hazan, Khan, & Khanna, 2020), the strategic role of brands has been in a state of evolution even before Covid-19. Thus, **we offer that the traditional model of branding is no longer sufficient to compete in today's hyper-connected environment; rather, marketers need to build brands that resonate with customers (and other stakeholders) at a more meaningful level.**

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**Traditional Model Branding**

Traditionally, brands were designed to serve two primary functions (Bhat & Reddy, 1998). The first was to convey the functional benefits of the product to the customer. For example, Bounty's value proposition as the "the Quicker Picker Upper" clearly emphasizes its functionality of superb absorbency over its competitors. The second function was to convey the brand's symbolic value. The Four Seasons, as a brand, symbolizes wealth, luxury, and money. These branding messages were historically pushed out in a one-way direction from company to customer, in the form of advertising and marketing on television, radio, newspapers, and magazines.

In more recent times, however, a number of new forces, such as technological advances, a growth in consumer sophistication, and the recent Covid-19 pandemic, have been at work to flip the traditional model of branding on its head. Consumers have started asking more of brands. Brands are expected to have a purpose – a raison d'etre that "builds the connective tissue that aligns all stakeholders beyond financial returns" (Kramer, 2017, p. 1). Today's purpose-driven brands go beyond delivering on functional and symbolic benefits; they empower consumers and foster transformations of their practices (Hajdas & Kłeczek, 2021). However, we propose that simply having and marketing a purpose is not enough; this purpose must be placed at the very heart of the brand, and the company's strategies and practices at every level must be designed to

activate or enhance this purpose to effectively transform the brand into a meaningful brand. A meaningful brand is one that resonates deeply not just with its customers, but with the variety of other stakeholders that interact with or are impacted by the brand. Below, we propose a new framework that explains how marketers can develop meaningful brands; they must leverage the key drivers of brand identity to affect brand meaningfulness and eventually, individual and societal well-being.

**Figure 1.** Framework for building meaningful brands
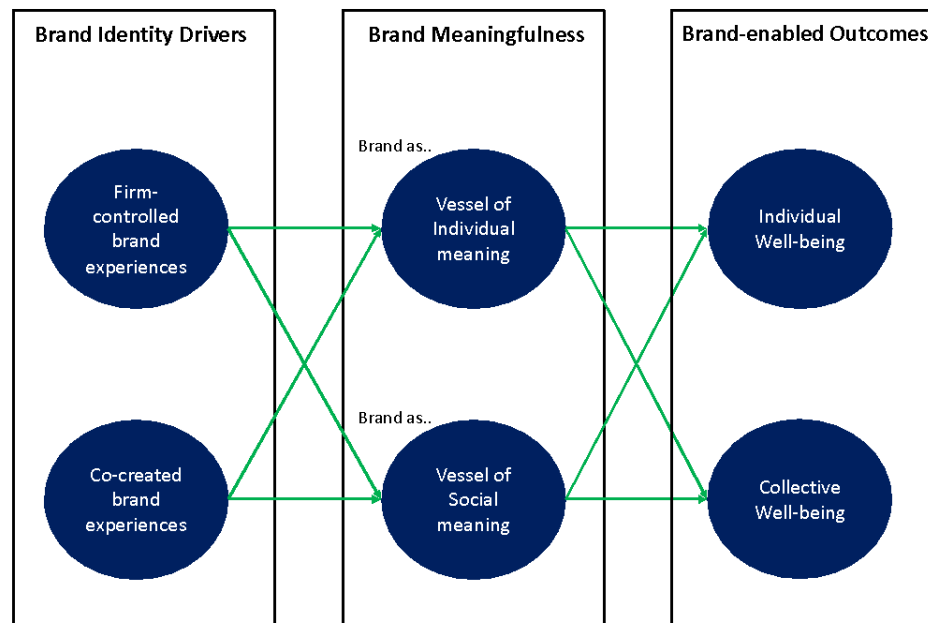


*Brand Identity Drivers*
The first part of our framework involves the drivers of brand identity. Whereas in the past, brand messaging was determined by the company and pushed out to the customer in the form of advertising and marketing in a one-way direction, in the contemporary hyperconnected world, branding is determined by a combination of firm-controlled brand messaging and customer co-created messaging. In today's information-rich environment, both happen at the same time. Customers are receiving branding messages from the company through advertising and marketing, and receiving brand information from fellow customers through social media and user-generated content. Sometimes, these two channels can work together in the same direction. This is a more desirable condition for the marketer. However, at other times, the two channels work at cross-purposes. For example, as a platform brand, while Airbnb markets its distinct value proposition of "Belong Anywhere," hosts often set clear boundaries and establish "territoriality" through their pre- and during-stay

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communications and interactions with guests (Wang & Li, 2020), challenging the Airbnb-controlled brand narrative. Regardless of whether the marketing and co-created messages are in synergy or not, customers are constantly receiving messages from these two brand identity drivers. The job of the marketer is to identify the most pertinent channels across these two domains and understand their roles in creating brand meaningfulness, the second part of our framework.

*Brand Meaningfulness*
In this article, we propose that the Covid-19 pandemic in particular has required brands to go beyond having a purpose, to become meaningful brands. "In 2020 customers have fundamentally reappraised themselves, demanding that the companies that serve them follow suit" (DeVlieger et al., n.d.). "People expect a response from brands that have become an intimate part of their daily lives" (Bemporad & Quinddazzi, 2020). Thus, building brands for today's world requires being relevant to consumers and what is happening in their lives. We contend that the notion of brand meaningfulness will underlie "the contract between organizations, consumers and society, and is likely to become a new fundamental driver of choice and demand" (Brickner, 2020). Perhaps one of the most extensive examinations of meaningful brands is the annual study of brand value by the Havas Group ("Entering the age of cynicism," n.d.). The company defines a ***meaningful brand as one that tangibly improves peoples' lives functionally, enhances their personal wellbeing, and contributes to wider society.***

Our framework draws on Swaminathan et al. (2020) to identify two components of brand meaningfulness. First, a brand derives meaningfulness at the individual level. This means that the consumer perceives the brand as a signal of quality (the economic perspective of brands) and understands what the brand stands for (the psychological perspective of brands); much of what the traditional branding model entails. Second, a brand derives meaning at a societal level. In this second component, brand builders look to leverage notions such as brand community and brand activism to drive desired associations of brand meaning. For example, food and beverage brand Oatly mobilized debate around traditional food production and consumption practices, and, in so doing, earned legitimacy in its brand positioning as "citizen activist" in the age of climate crisis and eco-anxiety. Similarly, Coca-Cola's supposedly failed attempt at re-formulating classic Coke in the mid-1980s resulted in significant customer backlash, but had the happy unintended consequence of making Americans realize its irreplaceable place in their lives and the grief created by its removal, thus evoking a sense of meaningfulness that remains strong to this day.

*Brand-Enabled Outcomes: Well-being*

The third part of our framework includes brand-enabled outcomes, of which we offer that meaningful brands are those that contribute to higher levels of well-being. Research in positive psychology has established a relationship between meaningfulness and well-being (Compton, 2000); we apply it to the context of brand building in today's world. We propose that brand meaningfulness contributes to enhanced well-being, both at the individual and collective levels. From an individual perspective, it has long been theorized that meaningful brands can enhance customer well-being (Sirgy & Lee, 2008). However, consistent with the Havas Group, we contend that brands must expand their well-being marketing efforts to stakeholders beyond the customer, including but not limited to employees, suppliers, communities, and the environment. For example, in the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic, Amazon suffered from a labor crisis that drew public scrutiny from lawmakers, regulators, and workers' rights groups, with several employees coming out to condemn the company for not doing enough to keep them safe from the virus as they continued to process a surge in orders (Palmer, 2020). While the company played an important role in enhancing individual customer well-being by ensuring that they were well-supplied during these challenging times, neglecting employees and the resulting media backlash hurt the Amazon brand's societal meaningfulness.

**Recommendations for Hospitality Practitioners: What does this all mean?**

The old ways of branding are now seen as empty. The consumer of today is more aware, more conscious, and more engaged in the world around them, and demands the same of the brands they support. A recent global survey of over 27,000 respondents found that 80% of them "believe brands are an essential part of the solution for the challenges facing humanity today. And they want brands to create change with them, not just for them: 84% want to share ideas and experiences with brands to develop better solutions" (Bemporad et al., 2020). Moreover, the business case for building meaningful brands is clear. In Havas' study, they found that more than half of the consumers surveyed were willing to pay more for a brand that enables individual and collective well-being.

In such a demanding landscape, perhaps no other industry is as well-suited to enhancing individual and societal well-being as hospitality. Indeed, the act of gathering with friends and family over dinner at a restaurant, the treasured cruise vacation with the family, cooking in a stranger's home, learning how to salsa in Havana, or a responsible trip to India that encourages local encounter and social dialogue can play an important role in both individual and collective rejuvenation. ***That said, how many***

***brands in hospitality can claim to be truly meaningful to their stakeholders? Most measures of consumer-based brand equity tend to place brands from other industries ahead of hospitality brands****.* For example, the Havas study of meaningful brands does not include a single hospitality brand in its top-30 list. Similarly, MBLM's annual brand intimacy ranking has four hospitality brands in its top-100 list, with Starbucks having the highest ranking of 20 ("Brand Intimacy Study 2020," n.d.). For an industry that inherently deals in well-being, that indicates significant room for improvement. We suggest that those responsible for marketing hospitality businesses of all sizes must: first, conceptualize the business as a brand with multiple touchpoints rather than just an on-site experience; and second, examine how the drivers of brand identity translate into brand meaningfulness and brand-enabled well-being. This will allow marketers to engineer meaningful brand interactions, recognizing that some drivers of brand identity cannot be directly controlled but perhaps influenced. Our framework offers a blueprint for developing a branding strategy that engenders meaningfulness and well-being, thus creating profitable, loyal stakeholder relationships.

As a word of caution to marketers looking to develop meaningful brands, it requires going beyond using purpose as simply a marketing tool. While associating the brand with good intentions is indeed a tenet of purpose-driven branding (Balis, 2020), an inside-out approach to meaning making is a characteristic of meaningfulness-driven branding. It's not just about jumping on the bandwagon to support the latest social cause. It goes beyond corporate social responsibility initiatives that rate high on ESG metrics. Rather, ***it involves developing a meaningful value proposition that is authentic to the brand and achieving optimal congruence between purpose and practice across a variety of brand stakeholders*** (Vredenburg, Kapitan, Spry, & Kemper, 2020). In conclusion, to operationalize our framework, we encourage practitioners to ask themselves the following critical questions that will enable them to develop meaningful brands.

- Who are the key stakeholders for your brand to whom the brand must be meaningful? What outcomes are important to these stakeholders?
- What touchpoints do these stakeholders use to engage with the brand? Which of these touchpoints are controlled by the marketer? How can the marketer have a voice in touchpoints that cannot be directly controlled?
- What meaning does the brand hold for stakeholders at the individual level, i.e., for customers, employees, suppliers, the local community, etc.? What meaning does the brand hold in the collective consciousness?
- Will stakeholders feel deprived if the brand were to go away? Does your brand promote individual and collective resilience, a sense of permanence and stability in stakeholders lives?

- Does your brand promote meaningful consumerism? Does the brand contribute to a shared future, encompassing ideas of sustainability, regeneration, and tackling socially-relevant issues and problems?
- How can you deliver brand experiences that deliver functionality, symbolism, and meaning to stakeholders?
- How does the brand support stakeholders in good times and in challenging times?
- How does the brand challenge the status quo? How does it take on and re-formulate traditional practices and constructs?

The list of questions above is by more means exhaustive, and we hope to spur debate and discussion on how brand meaningfulness can be conceptualized, measured, and operationalized. For practitioners, however, it offers a more holistic lens through which to approach the branding challenge, a lens that can subsequently impact brand strategy, product development, marketing research, integrated marketing communications, and a host of other marketing and branding functions.

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