



BRAND ARCHITECTURE

Crafting a Comprehensive Brand Portfolio Strategy

The following report is an abridged version from Chapter 5 of *The Indispensable Brand* by Mitch Duckler. The book provides a roadmap for crafting a brand strategy that rises above the noise and monotony in the marketplace... and for catapulting brands from indistinguishable to indispensable.

Breaking Down Portfolio Strategy

Brand portfolio strategy and architecture are critical components of a successful brand strategy. Their complexity and nuances make them essential concepts for achieving meaningful brand differentiation. Unlike other components of brand strategy, most of the key tenets are just as relevant today as they were when they were initially developed, so there isn't a significant call to action for improvement or change. Even so, the importance of brand portfolio strategy and architecture cannot be overstated.

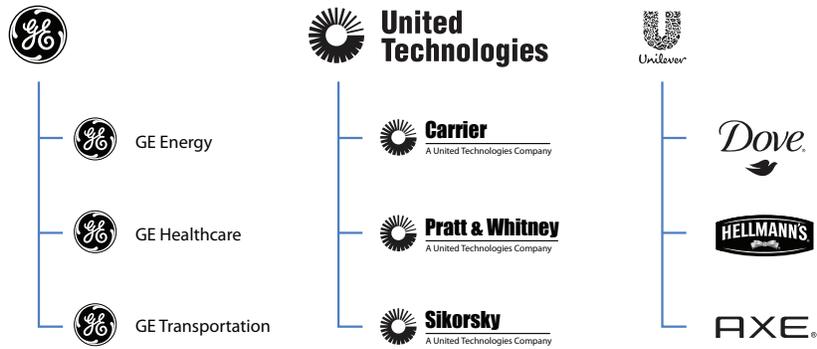
Brand portfolio strategy has become very popular in recent years due to the elevated stature of brands. Brands represent a company's most intangible assets, so establishing an optimal mix of them has become prioritized. Managing the brands also guarantees maximum marketplace relevance and internal efficiencies. The increasing prominence of merger and acquisition (M&A) activity has also played a role in its growing popularity. When large, multinational companies acquire more companies, they often do so without taking the necessary steps to optimize their new brand portfolios, resulting in bloated brand portfolios that limit internal efficiency, confuse external stakeholders, and increase costs.

Brand portfolio strategy, at its core, determines the number of brands that a company's portfolio should contain. It explains how to deploy those brands within the business and in the market. A long-term approach for growth is provided by establishing strategic roles for each brand and including what it should contribute to the company. Brand portfolio strategy also dictates the relationships brands should have with one another. The concept of relationships between brands is often referred to as brand architecture. "Brand portfolio strategy" and "brand architecture" are terms that are often used interchangeably, but the latter is a distinct, critical component of the former.

Two of the books written by David Aaker—*Brand Leadership* and *Brand Portfolio Strategy*—offer commendable frameworks, structures, and guiding principles for managing complex, large brand portfolios.^{1,2} The ideas from these books have helped companies distinguish different types of brands (e.g., sub-brands, co-brands, endorsed brands, descriptive brands) and their roles in driving competitive advantage and profitable growth. Some of Aaker's most notable work produced a continuum framework for brand portfolios that is still widely embraced today.

Figure 1
Brand Architecture Continuum

← **Branded House** ————— **House of Brands** →



The master brand, typically a corporate brand, serves as the dominant (if not only) brand within the portfolio

Standalone brands—each with little to no connection to the corporate brand—have the greatest equity

In Branded Leadership, Aaker refers to one end of the brand portfolio spectrum as “branded house,” a portfolio where the master brand (usually a corporate brand) acts as the dominant brand. In this situation, descriptive sub-brands have a minimal role in establishing market-facing equity and driving business results. General Electric is a premier example of a branded house.

At the other end of the spectrum is “house of brands.” Here, independent, standalone brands—each with a minimal connection to the corporate brand—have the greatest equity and represent the primary face to the market. P&G is an excellent example of this, for its product brands like Tide and Crest have more consumer equity than the corporate brand. Independent brands are the primary conduit to customers in a house of brands.



The Building Blocks of Brand Portfolio Strategy

The exact components of a comprehensive brand portfolio strategy vary based on the company and the nature of its business, but most brand portfolios should address four key questions.

WHAT IS THE OPTIMAL NUMBER OF BRANDS?

The optimal number of brands required to go to market is one of the most fundamental questions for a brand portfolio. There is a general rule that companies should follow when considering the optimal number of brands: fewer is better than more, all other things being equal. Brands are expensive assets to develop, launch, and maintain. In addition to the hard costs involved, brands also require time, effort, and oversight to manage. Without that effort, brands cannot maintain their relevance and points of difference. Maintaining a portfolio with a few strong brands is a worthwhile objective. When new products or services enter the portfolio, organically, or through an acquisition, the default response should be to house the newcomers within an existing brand. If that isn't possible, then a separate brand may be justified.

WHAT IS THE STRATEGIC ROLE OF EACH BRAND WITHIN THE PORTFOLIO?

As assets, brands should be strategically managed. Defining and continually re-evaluating strategic roles for brands is very important. There are a variety of strategic roles to consider. Three important strategic roles that merit mention include financial, customer, and competitive roles.

Financial Roles are the most objective and straightforward of the three types. These include premium pricing, opening price point, loss leaders, and cash cows. While brands may have individual offerings that are outliers, they typically serve financial roles for their companies. An example of a financial role can be seen with Hellmann's Mayonnaise (Unilever)—a cash cow within the Unilever brand portfolio with high market share and low growth, generating significant revenue for with minimal incremental investment.

Customer roles pertain to the types of customers the brand serves. This is a customary strategic role for B2C companies to define, for they often align their brands by target segment. The equivalent in B2B may be industry or vertical, but the premise is the same. This role gives a brand the responsibility to serve a particular market segment. PepsiCo's Mountain Dew is an example of a brand that serves an important consumer segment in the soft drink industry—young, primarily male, high-energy fans of video games or extreme sports.

Competitive roles come into play when brands are charged with taking on a competing brand and neutralizing its advantages or beating it in the market. For example, a fighter brand is designed to undercut a specific competitor on price, to undermine its success, or to steal market share. Intel's Celeron microprocessor is an example of this—it is a cheaper, less powerful version of Intel's Pentium chips.

WHAT IS THE SCOPE OF EACH BRAND IN TERMS OF HOW IT IS DEPLOYED IN THE MARKET?

The scope of a brand is its range. It pertains to how the brand is deployed in the market (i.e., which products and services it's assigned to). There are different definitions of scope, depending on the company and the nature of its business. There are four common ways to think about a brand's scope: across customer segments, product categories, price or value tier, and geographies.

Consumer-oriented brands often define their range by customer segments, while many B2B companies define their brands' scope by the product categories they serve. Many businesses, B2B or B2C, define scope at least in part by their price or value tier. Global companies sometimes go to market with different brands (with at times nearly identical products) in different regions in the world. Regardless of which approach is used, the brand portfolio strategy should explicitly and purposefully dictate how to deploy brands across the market.

WHAT TYPE OF RELATIONSHIPS SHOULD BRANDS WITHIN THE PORTFOLIO HAVE WITH ONE ANOTHER?

Marketers also need to consider the type of relationship (if any) brands within the portfolio should have with one another. This consideration involves brand architecture, which defines explicit relationships among brands in a portfolio. This often involves the relationship between a product brand and a corporate brand. An explicit relationship tends to be the most evident in the company's visual identity system, through logo locks and other overt linkages.



Ins and Outs of Brand Portfolio Organization

With these strategic roles in mind, we can start to think about how to construct (or realign) a brand portfolio. Every portfolio should have an organizing principle, the overarching framework, or model to arrange brands within a portfolio. This is almost always the scope component of the brand portfolio strategy. Once the company settles on an organizing principle, it becomes easier to craft the optimal brand portfolio.

Following are examples of how each of the previously referenced scope alternatives can translate into an organizing principle for a brand portfolio.

CUSTOMER SEGMENTS

Customer segmentation represents one of the most powerful ways to organize a brand portfolio. It is an approach that is outward-looking rather than internally focused. It is difficult to go wrong when brand strategy centers on the customer, a concept that is well understood and widely embraced by marketers. Companies can segment customers across several dimensions: demographics, attitudes, needs, behaviors, or some combination of those factors. The key is that the branding revolves around the customer, rather than the company and its products.

For example, PepsiCo organizes its extensive portfolio by classifying its brands based on whether they are “Better for You,” “Good for You,” or “Fun for you,” to tap into consumer attitudes toward food and drinks. Toyota is another example of a company that structures its brand portfolio by consumer segment as well. The Prius serves “environmentally conscious early adopters,” the Scion is for “hip-at-ear drivers on a budget,” and the Camry is for “practical families who desire performance.”

PRODUCT CATEGORIES OR VERTICALS

Companies can also organize brand portfolios around product categories or industry verticals. B2B companies do this more frequently than B2C companies. This is a tempting approach because it is both straightforward and simple. Categories and industries are easy to define and universally understood, making it a tempting way to structure a portfolio and position brands. However, this organizing principle tends to be less sophisticated and effective than customer segmentation. It inherently assumes that all customers from a category or within an industry have similar needs and purchase drivers. This approach can also easily contribute to the problem of brand monotony; when multiple companies with competing brands strive to position themselves around a set of attitudes that are common to an entire category or industry, differentiation becomes difficult.

A successful example of organizing a brand portfolio by category is 3M. This company structures its consumer brands through disparate product categories, such as cleaning and protecting, office, sports and recreation, and decorating, organizing, and crafts. Within each category are strong brands like Post-it and Scotch, which are specific to the product category and generally not used across categories. Caterpillar, another company that structures itself around function, has its Cat brand equipment covering products like bulldozers, while its Anchor brand covers engines.

PRICE AND VALUE TIERS

Organizing a brand portfolio by value tier is typically based on price point. The retail approach of good, better, best is an example of this. This approach has its supporters but is arguably an incomplete organizing principle. Most brand portfolios inherently have a value tier component, but it tends to be a secondary variable to something more compelling—like customer need, want, benefit, or other component.

At first glance, the thirty-plus brands under the Marriott corporate brand appear to be organized along the value continuum.³ Fairfield Inn and Suites serves consumers in the moderate market, while the Ritz-Carlton brand caters to luxury. Marriott has another offering, the Moxy brand, that targets young, hip consumers looking for an affordable option that doesn't sacrifice style or comfort.⁴ Price and value, however, remain a secondary principle, as different hotel brands also cater to different types of consumer segments and desired experiences.

GEOGRAPHIES OR REGIONS

Some global companies organize their portfolios by region. These companies can market virtually the same product or service with different brands and positioning in different places. This organizing principle is best used when it is a secondary component to something more substantial and foundational. The primary reason a company would follow this approach would be if the needs and behaviors of its customers differed meaningfully by region.

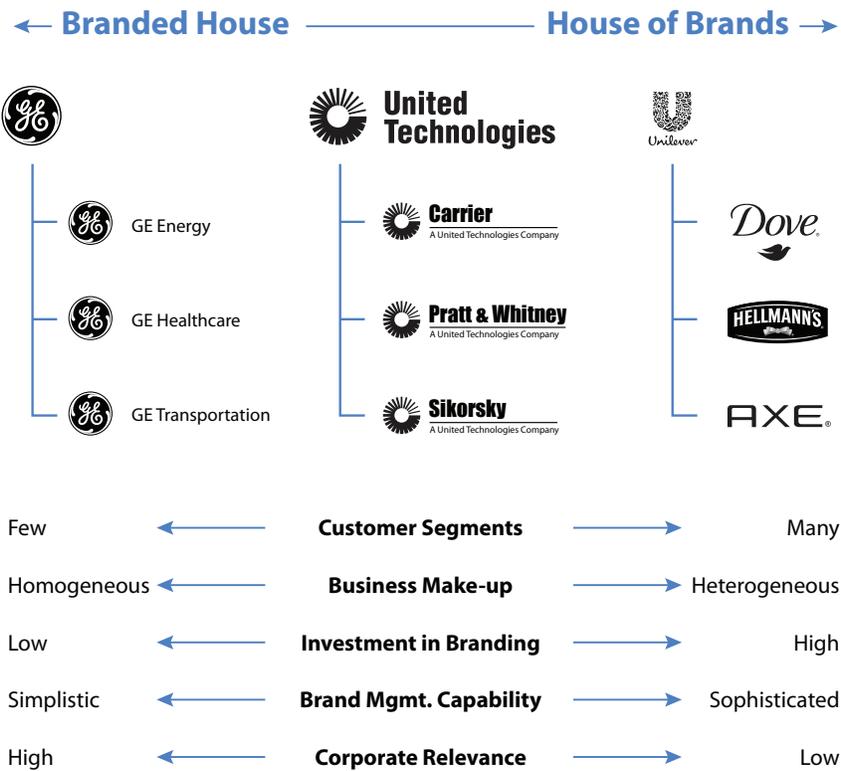
AB InBev is a company that uses geography (in part) to structure its portfolio. It has global brands like Budweiser and Becks; multi-country brands like Leffe and Hoegaarden; and a host of brands to meet taste profiles in specific countries, like Harbin Ice in China and Brahma in Brazil.

Branded House versus House of Brands

As mentioned before, the terms “branded house” and “house of brands” were coined by David Aaker in his book Brand Leadership. Aaker proposed a brand relationship spectrum to explain how offers in a portfolio relate to their corporate parent brand. This is still used today by marketers striving to find the right approach to structure their brand portfolios.

Aaker’s work goes into significant detail and depth about the brand architecture spectrum, providing numerous examples of companies with portfolios on either end and at points in between. He also proposes the pros and cons of each side. While the considerations for companies deciding where to reside on that spectrum vary, five factors apply to every company of any size and in any industry.

Figure 2
Factors Influencing Brand Architecture Continuum



1. NUMBER OF CUSTOMER SEGMENTS

Companies should consider the number of distinct customer segments they serve and are attempting to target. A well-positioned brand is targeted toward a single customer segment and can only serve that segment (and, at most, one or two others) exceedingly well. Therefore, the more distinct customer segments in the market that the company seeks to serve, the more brands required to do so effectively. Having numerous distinct segments would usually prompt a company to lean toward the house of brands side of the spectrum.

2. RANGE OR BREADTH OF OFFER

This factor is closely related to customer segments. One of the fundamental premises of brand extension is how brands should be defined by something more than the product category or categories in which they compete. Brands, however, have limitations in terms of how far they can stretch across different categories. Every brand has categories for which they are inherently a poor fit. In other words, even the most celebrated brands can only stretch so far. As a rule of thumb, the more product categories in which a company competes, the more likely that its portfolio will need to reside on the house of brands side of the spectrum.

There are exceptions to this rule, though, and they can be found in B2B organizations. General Electric is the quintessential branded house because its corporate master brand demonstrates relevance across a diverse set of industries and product categories ranging from transportation and energy to healthcare and industrial.

3. CORPORATE BRAND RELEVANCE

Corporate brands can have varying levels of market relevance based on several factors. One is the nature of the business. Some businesses deem the company behind the products and services more important than others do. Professional services is an industry where the master brand is very critical; clients often buy the brand as much as the firm's individual service offerings. In these cases, it makes sense to go to market with a strong focus on the corporate brand. Firms like McKinsey & Company, Boston Consulting Group, KPMG, and Ernst & Young are quintessential branded houses that rely heavily on their master brands. The more established and relevant the corporate brand is, the greater its ability to reside on the branded house end of the spectrum

4. INVESTMENT IN BRANDING

The extent to which a company is willing to invest in building brands determines where on the brand portfolio spectrum it should reside. Brands are assets and require significant investment to develop, launch, and maintain. This includes expenses and ongoing investments like advertising, market research, and digital activation. These costs mean that a house of brands portfolio requires more financial resources to support than a branded house portfolio.

5. COMMITMENT TO TALENT DEVELOPMENT (IN BRANDING)

Brand management also requires human resources; companies need human talent to build and maintain strong brand assets. Organizations should thus consider the extent to which they're willing to invest in recruiting and developing employees with the necessary skills to drive brand leadership. This applies to the strategic and creative sides of brand-building. A house of brands portfolio almost always requires more internal brand and marketing talent than a branded house portfolio.

No matter where on the spectrum of house of brands versus branded house a company falls, differentiation remains essential for success. If individual brands are not compelling (or if a branded house cannot rely on a sufficiently compelling corporate brand), it will fail to break out of the brand monotony that characterizes modern-day marketing.

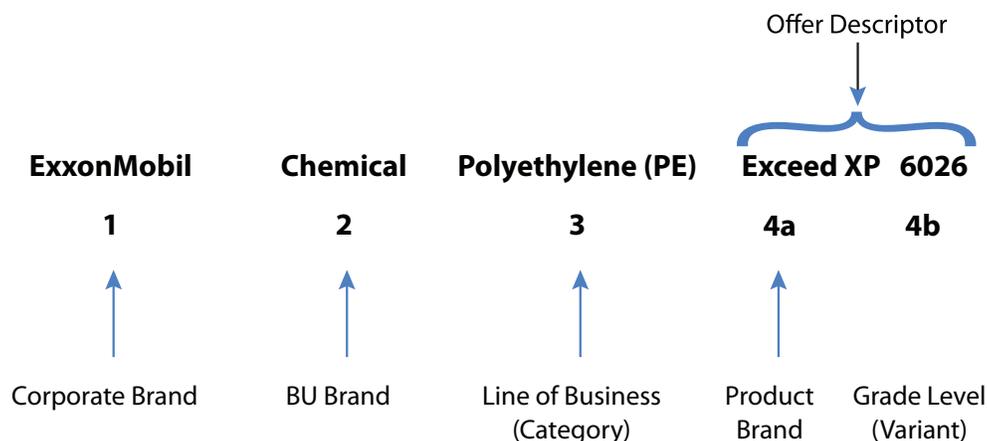
Brand Architecture Hierarchy and Equity Flow

In addition to a portfolio's organizing principle, companies must also consider brand hierarchy, a tiered structure that clarifies which entities or offerings are branded and their relative importance within the portfolio. This is particularly important when addressing complex B2B offerings, specifically when deciding how to name them and sequence their naming components.

For example, consider the B2B product offering ExxonMobil Chemical PE Exceed XP 6020.

Figure 3
Naming Architecture

ExxonMobil Chemical PE Exceed XP 6026



Here, we clearly see a product brand (Exceed) and a grade level (XP 6026). We also see a corporate brand (ExxonMobil), a business unit brand (Chemical), and a category descriptor (Polyethylene, or PE)⁵. The order in which these entities are included in a product name is a question of hierarchy.

Defining hierarchy should be purposeful and strategic, driven more by external considerations (like customer clarity) rather than internal factors. When naming, the sequencing of entities typically runs from macro to micro—usually beginning with the corporate brand and continuing down to the product grade or SKU. Brand hierarchy and linkage should always be intentional and strategic. If multiple brands are overtly associated with each other, there should be a compelling reason behind their pairing.

The rationale for relating brands involves equity flow—a desire to transfer positive equity between associated brands, whether in one direction or both. It typically tends to flow downstream in the brand hierarchy, from a corporate (parent) brand to a product (child) brand. The objective is for the more established corporate brand to lend the lesser-known product brand confidence or trust. It's essentially a form of reassurance for the market that the lesser-known entity is a safe proposition. For example, when Amazon launched its voice-controlled assistant, Echo, it established an association between the product brand and the Amazon master brand. This transferred Amazon's brand equity to the new child brand.

In cases where brand equity moves upstream, from the child brand to the parent brand, the smaller brand is either better known or more highly regarded than the larger one. An example of this is the reverse equity flow between Comcast and Xfinity.⁶ Xfinity arguably has a relatively more positive reputation than its parent brand, Comcast. Overt linkage with Xfinity is thus beneficial to the Comcast brand.

Six Types of Brands and How They Function

David Aaker’s books on brand portfolio strategy and brand architecture introduced myriad brands and the roles they serve within their respective brand portfolios. There are a few types of brands that consistently rise to the top in terms of their importance and prominence.

Figure 4
Brand Types

	Brand Type	Definition	Examples
Emphasis on Master Brand  Emphasis on 'Other' Brand	Master	A brand that serves as the primary frame of reference, often carrying the corporate name	 
	Descriptive	An equity that is purely functional/descriptive in nature, with a logo lock to the master brand	 
	Sub-	A brand which establishes equity beyond a mere category descriptor, in conjunction with master	 
	Endorsed	An equity that is endorsed by the master brand, deriving benefit from it by virtue of the association	 
	Co-	An equity overtly linked to the master brand, receiving equal emphasis vis-à-vis the master (i.e., logo lock)	 

MASTER BRANDS

A master brand serves as a primary point of reference, a dominant brand capable of standing independently within a portfolio. Depending on whether the portfolio is a branded house or a house of brands, the master brand exerts either a little or a lot of influence over other brands.

Popular examples of master brands include Amazon, FedEx, Tide, Hershey, Google—and so on. Master brands are corporate brands in some cases, but they can also be product brands. They can sometimes even be both, but they share the common characteristics of recognizability and dominance.

DESCRIPTIVE BRANDS

Descriptive brands have no equity outside the master brands they are attached to. This term simply describes the nature of the offer, a typically generic product or service category. It signals the nature of the offer, which will trade entirely off the established equity of the master brand.

Examples of descriptive brands include NBC Sports, FedEx Office, and Google Analytics. As you can see, the “sub” in these cases (Sports, Office, Analytics) is simply a generic category label, with the primary equity residing with the master brand.

ENDORSED BRANDS

Endorsed brands have some identity and equity on their own, but they borrow credibility through association with the master brand. A company may use an endorsed brand to lend immediate credibility to a new entity or establish a new relationship. If the endorsed brand is a new product or offering, the master brand offers a “stamp of approval” that may eventually become unnecessary. When the endorsed brand is due to an acquisition, this relationship clarifies a new ownership structure in the market.

An example of this would be when Xerox made Chicago Office Technology Group a wholly-owned subsidiary in 2007. The architecture adopted was “COTG – A Xerox Company,” which is still in effect today.⁷ In other cases, however, the endorsed brand architecture is temporary, only in effect until the association has been successfully established, and overt linkage is no longer necessary.

SUB-BRANDS

Sub-brands are relatively similar in nature to endorsed brands, but the role of the entity is slightly more substantial in this case.⁸ The sub-brand establishes more of its own equity and independence from the master brand.

McDonald’s brands—such as Egg McMuffin and Chicken McNuggets—don’t have the full McDonald’s name in front of them, but they still carry the identity of the brand. Polo (Ralph Lauren) and PlayStation (Sony) are two other sub-brand examples.

CO-BRANDS

The most common definition of a co-brand is when two companies work together and form a partnership, creating a brand or marketing synergy. This can also occur between two brands within a single company. In either case, two master brands are paired together, both meaningfully emphasized. Two examples of co-brands are Apple Nike+ and Under Armour MyFitnessPal. The two co-brands are recognizable to consumers individually, but their combinations provide them with even more power.

STANDALONE BRANDS

Standalone brands are special cases of master brands, typically reserved for product brands rather than corporate brands. This category is defined by a lack of desire to associate the standalone product brand with the master corporate brand. To do so, in this case, would be irrelevant, or possibly even detrimental to the equity of one or both brands.

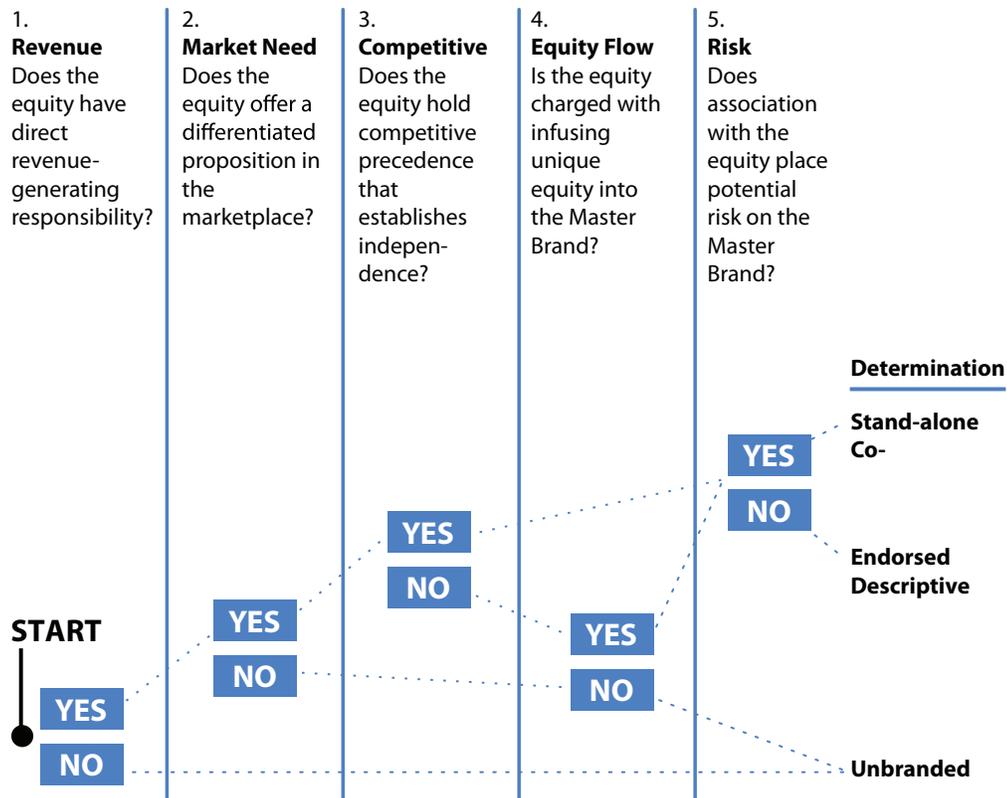
A very common reason standalone brands remain autonomous is tied to the price/value relationship. When a brand within a portfolio is either more luxurious or significantly cheaper than the master brand, an association between the two brands could be harmful. Examples of such standalone brands include Waldorf Astoria (Hilton) and any of the luxury car brands owned by Volkswagen (Porsche, Lamborghini, and Bentley).

Which Brand Types and Associations to Choose?

In conclusion, to determine the type of brand for any given situation is a highly strategic decision. A decision tree, a simple tool consisting of a series of questions with a finite set of answers, may help. The results of those questions lead to an outcome at the end of the tree that will determine the optimal branding option. A decision tree is only as effective as the thought put into its development. The right questions should be asked in the right sequence to ensure a logical path for answers to follow.

Below is an example of a brand decision tool:

Figure 5
Brand Decision Tool—Illustrative Example



The decisions for how to best structure a brand portfolio are complex and multidimensional. No ironclad rules drive them, for every situation is unique, but here are six guiding principles to keep in mind:

Guiding Principles for Brand Portfolio Strategy and Architecture

GUIDING PRINCIPLE 1: BUILD AND LEVERAGE A STRONG CORPORATE BRAND

This principle reflects the importance of the corporate brand in any company’s portfolio (branded house or not). Leveraging a corporate brand with a clear frame of reference and positive equity for other brands in the portfolio is the goal of every organization (aside from pure holding companies).⁹

Example: There are several excellent examples for this principle. IBM, Proctor & Gamble, Microsoft, Apple, Google, and Nike are just a few of the many strong corporate brands today that accomplish several goals. They provide a strong “reason to believe” for their respective offerings, effectively extend their relevance across price/value tiers and product categories, and instill significant confidence in important stakeholders beyond customers (e.g., investors, media members, regulators). A strong corporate brand provides the power and influence that no other type of brand can match.

GUIDING PRINCIPLE 2: DEFINE STRATEGIC ROLES FOR BRANDS

The key to this principle is to define the strategic needs and priorities of the business and to ensure that the brand portfolio aligns with them.

Example: American Express is a great example of this principle; its brand portfolio fulfills virtually every type of strategic role. The flagship Green Card is one of its most versatile offerings, given its mainstream appeal. The portfolio also features a brand targeted to a specific category—OPEN, a brand dedicated to small businesses. It uses co-brands to address specific consumer segments, like Delta SkyMiles and Hilton Honors cards for frequent travelers who value miles and points. The Platinum brand addresses another consumer segment, catering to the higher end of the market and charging hundreds of dollars in exchange for privileges. American Express also has a brand defined mainly by a competitive role: its Blue card, essentially a fighter brand that competes against Discover by offering many of the same consumer-friendly perks.

GUIDING PRINCIPLE 3: EMPLOY SIMPLE AND CLEAR BRAND ARCHITECTURE

Brand architecture is a central component of brand portfolio strategy because it articulates the explicit, market-facing relationships that brands within a portfolio have with one another. This principle is almost entirely externally focused. It is important to establish a brand architecture that makes it easy for outside stakeholders to view quickly, understand it immediately, and know which offer works best for them. A simple and clear brand architecture should have a logical organizing principle, few levels of hierarchy, and follow a rigorous set of guidelines that ensure a consistent expression and execution in the marketplace. This includes the visual identity and verbal expression of brands, as well as the naming conventions for product and service offerings.

Example: United Technologies employs a clear brand architecture. With a portfolio that includes diverse options like Otis, Carrier, and Pratt & Whitney, United Technologies found a way to organize and express its portfolio effectively. Despite taking advantage of natural synergies, this portfolio of brands maintains important independence and distinction for its individual brands. It has used its visual identity system and endorsement strategy to construct a brand architecture that is both internally efficient and externally clear.

GUIDING PRINCIPLE 4: BUILD RELEVANCE ACROSS VALUE TIERS

To build relevance across value tiers means to deliberately align individual brands to target segments within each tier to maximize the company's reach. The key here is to push the boundaries for each brand's relevance (in this case, in terms of pricing) as far as possible. Even with skillful use of sub-branding, however, every brand has an inherent limit for how far it can stretch or dip down on price points. If the brand hits those limits, the company should find a different brand to house the offering at that price point or walk away.

Example: The Whirlpool Corporation offers three distinct kitchen appliance brands that target a different value tier with appropriate benefits and price points.¹⁰ KitchenAid is an upscale brand at a high-price tier that is meant to serve professional chefs and home enthusiasts. The Whirlpool brand is a mass-marketed brand at a mid-price tier that caters to families looking for quality and efficiency. Roper is a value brand at a low-price tier that services customers who buy based on price and are looking for affordable solutions.

GUIDING PRINCIPLE 5: MAXIMIZE EXTENDIBILITY OF BRANDS

This principle is similar to the previous one, as it is also about extendibility and stretch. However, instead of a vertical extension across price tiers, it focuses on a horizontal extension across categories. Aside from this difference, the key takeaways are identical. The best practice is to extend any brand within a portfolio to the furthest extent possible without diluting or damaging its equity.¹¹ This will lead to an improved ability to synergize, capitalize on economies of scale, and penetrate new categories and markets. Companies would ideally be able to achieve this with a portfolio of as few brands as possible.

Example: The Clorox brand provides an example of maximizing extendibility within appropriate limits. Its roots are in bleach, but the brand has successfully extended into other categories with chemical cleaning solutions, like bathroom cleaner product segments. Non-cleaning categories without bleach-based products, however, were out of the question.

Companies that follow these five guiding principles will realize significant competitive advantages from their brand portfolio strategies and brand architecture. With a solid foundation, brands are able to achieve greater levels of differentiation, competitive advantage, and overall success.

Notes

- 1 David A. Akker and Erich Joachimsthaler, *Brand Leadership* (New York: The Free Press, 2009).
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