

What's Hot in Brand Research

Brand is a dynamic system which generates and responds to perceptions about value

Thinking about brand there are many definitions and specific areas of focus e.g., brand strategy, equity and extension however, it is consistently described in ways that can be summed up as:

“Brand is a dynamic system which generates and responds to perceptions about value.”

A brand lives in the domain of emotions and meaning-making, but also in usefulness and usability. It may spread across multiple channels, physical devices and software. It can be communicated and experienced in direct and indirect ways.

Brands are an investment vehicle for businesses. This investment vehicle is designed to build certain perceptions and experiences influencing purchasing patterns and relationship with potential and existing customers.

Brand research informs decision making about this investment vehicle and is vigorous and constantly evolving. Recent research into the emotions as drivers of brand experience is bringing about an appropriate balance to an over-emphasis on left-brain rational approaches in brand research and investment decisions.

In addition, meaning making, an intensely human capability, may be the basis of a new wave of innovation with significant impact on branding. Diller, Shedroff and Rhea assert that brands have evolved beyond promoting identity, status and emotional benefits to consumers' assigning meaning, based on their deeply-held, universal values, to their experience of a product or service.

“An experience can be created by designing all potential touch points, surrounding the customer with a highly coordinated environment wherever she turns, but it takes something more to make these experiences valuable so that customers connect personally with them and integrate them into their lives. We think that “something” is meaning.”
...Assigning meaning to experience is how each of us creates the story of our life and its ultimate value and purpose. ¹

Implications of shift in brand paradigm

Whether you agree there is a paradigm shift or not it is clear that brand understanding is evolving rapidly requiring openness and new approaches to make wise decisions about investing in brand.

This White Paper will assist you to scout the lay of the land, orient yourself to recent trends, understand some research tools & techniques for charting new territory and provide an illustrative case study.

The lay of the land - What brand research is and isn't

Some people distinguish brand research from market research e.g.,

If market research is about benchmarking demand in the marketplace, then brand research is about creating differentiation in the mind of the customer. If market research is about identifying new products and services, then brand research is about why customers choose to purchase those new products. Finally, if market research is about determining price elasticity, then brand research is about commanding a premium price. ²

Other people do not distinguish between market and brand research. Rather they point out that branding is an element common to multiple disciplines e.g.,

“...branding, a key aspect of marketing, is also a key aspect of the success of user-interfaces.” ³

The relationship between branding and user interfaces (a term often associated with computers but not restricted to them) is multi-dimensional and not always obvious.

Historically the discipline of Design and its contribution to brand research and development has been seen in a narrow way. Design was synonymous with creating the aesthetics or style of a brand and the associated creative artefacts and content, often with a strong focus on the print medium.

More recently as the channels and devices in which a brand is experienced become more diverse (e.g., WWW, mobiles, interactive television) this view of Design and its role has expanded to recognise the field of Interaction or User Experience (UX) Design and Industrial Design.

The field of Interaction or UX Design utilises research and design methodologies, techniques and tools that elicit insights into the why of users' goals, needs and motivations and translates these insights into product and service concepts in one or more channels.

Now for a company to innovate effectively these disciplines [to invent, design and market] which used to function autonomously need to align and converge. All members of a company's innovation team need to work in unison to deliver a successful experience, particularly if the experience is to be meaningful. ⁴

Current trends

These five trends focus on what's hot and why you should orient toward them; it is not an exhaustive list, but a good start point.

Trend 1: Research compass with many points

A visit to the World Advertising Research Centre (WARC) and ESOMAR sites reveals a wonderful range of research topics and activities drawing on disciplines as diverse as Anthropology, Design, Marketing and Psychology.

This diversity represents a new openness to go beyond the usual stock-in-trade of market research e.g., focus groups, one-on-one interviews and panels to embrace sophisticated exploratory and qualitative techniques.

The openness is about breaking out-of-the-box of 'how' brand has been conceived and measured.

Use of Technology

Many businesses are reinventing how they track and measure brand by using technology to enhance qualitative techniques e.g.,

- Using devices such as webcam and eye-tracking mounts to observe consumers experience in depth and in their context of use,
- Proprietary software which trawls and reports on consumer content on the WWW (forums, blogs etc) which researchers then investigate further with target consumers,
- "Deliberative events" in which large-scale qualitative consultation takes place in focus group style discussion and an element of decision making involves electronic voting.

Some researchers are predicting that devices that measure neurological and physiological reactions will be the next big thing in qualitative research.⁵

Blend of Quantitative and Qualitative

The strength of combining quantitative and qualitative techniques is increasingly recognised. Moët Hennessy, for example, has created an innovative 360 degree research perspective for each of their brands integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches within a single data collection process – something we explore in Figure 1, below.

Cultural Accuracy

There is a heightened awareness of cultural diversity and techniques and measurements which specifically take into account these differences. Alternatively approaches which tap into the universal and non-verbal aspects of human responsiveness are also rapidly expanding.

Trend 2: Focus on emotions

There is a trend to explore non-verbal reactions to brands, and to question the value of rational, conscious explanations of decision-making.⁶

This trend embodies research efforts to embrace consumers as meaning-makers by understanding what they experience and how they assign meaning e.g., what is the role of emotions? Do humans have universal values? It demonstrates that there is indeed a shift in brand understanding in progress.

Emotions are what make brands, but measuring them is complex⁷

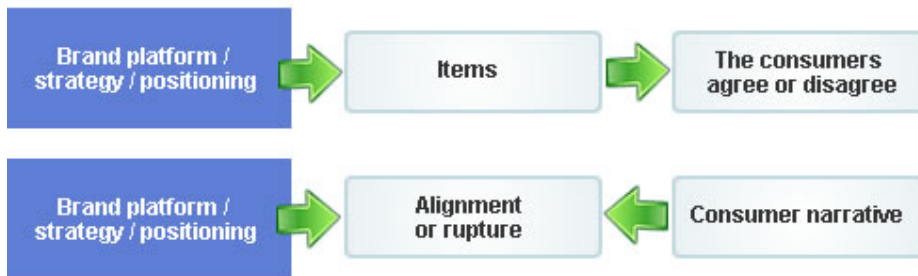
Measuring Emotions for Brand Equity

Commencing in 2005 Moët Hennessy with Reperes (a research agency) engaged in a transformational approach to measuring brand equity. Rejecting traditional brand tracking studies as highly reductive, “long on numbers but short on insights” they devised a new methodology and instrument for measuring brand equity called Emotional Monitoring®.

This methodology blends qualitative and quantitative approaches in a single data collection process and is designed for use across cultures.

A Qualitative Exploration...	And Quantitative Measurements
Use of projective measures: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To collect consumers hidden personal representations, repressed feelings and non-expressed needs. - And obtain a precise description of their perceptions, letting them use their own words. 	Creation of new quantitative indicators: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Combining information resulting from qualitative and quantitative analysis. - To enable monitoring of evolutions over time.
Within a single data collection process.	

Rather than asking a consumer to judge a brand (they are not an expert) help them to express their emotions.



A more precise understanding of their perceptions, leaving them to use their own words, their own images, their emotions.

... we strongly felt that the best tool for guiding brand strategy is not directly what consumers think about brands, but an analysis of the gaps between their perceptions and the desired brand values, expressed in the brand essence (DNA), that the client is trying to communicate.⁸

Figure 1: Model of the Moët Hennessy research approach

The Role of Emotions

According to cognitive emotion psychology, emotions are considered to be the outcome of appraisal processes, in which appraisal is a non-rational or so called 'sense evaluation'. Particular types of emotions are associated with particular types of appraisals and emotions can potentially be predicted from the nature of the underlying appraisal.

PrEmo, a sophisticated non-verbal, self report instrument for measuring product emotions was created by Pieter Desmet, Delft University of Technology Netherlands⁹ this is explained in Figure 2 below.

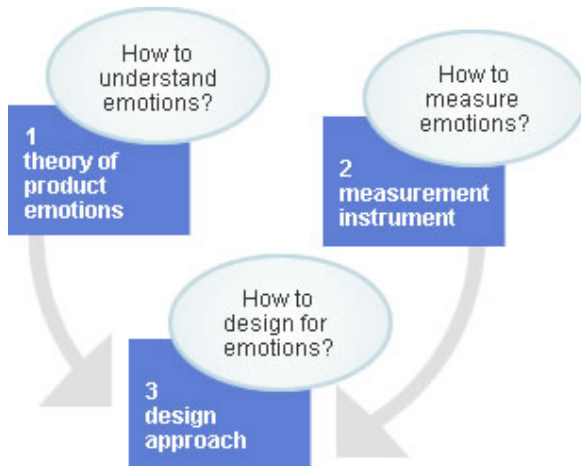


Figure 2: PrEmo model

Desmet has found that by understanding and measuring different types of emotional responses it is possible to design products that target specific types of emotions. Desmet has identified four product emotions types falling into four of the five classes of appraisal types outlined in Figure 3 below.

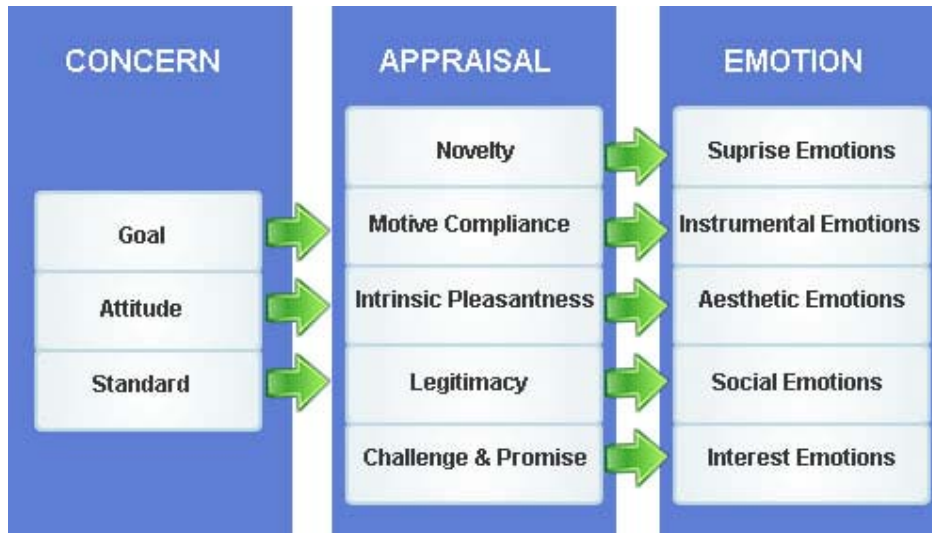


Figure 3: Different product emotion types

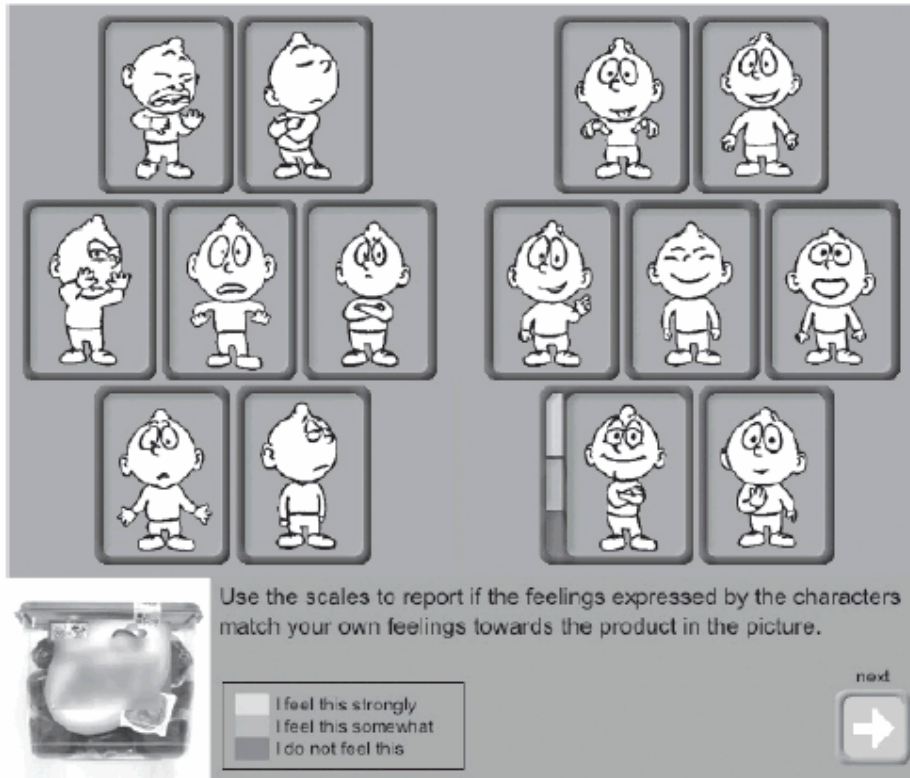


Figure 4: PrEmo Tool in action

Brand Extension – Innovative Design in Industry

In late 2005 a leading Australian marketing and advertising company began intensive activity to extend one of its flagship brands into a vertical market. First there was initial market research to identify potential verticals, analyse industry segments within them and hone in on opportunities. Then the innovation really began.

The company engaged its internal ‘Concept and Design’ team to conduct in-depth research and design iteration with consumers and service providers to drive the vertical creation (User Centred Design methodology).

The team observed service providers as they worked on-site using devices of interest in their context-of-use (Contextual Enquiry) and supported consumers as they produced diaries with detailed photographic and written narratives about their experience of interacting with these service providers (Cultural Probe Diary Study). These research techniques generated unique insights which powered the design and development process for the vertical’s products and services. The research identified some no-go zones as well as determining the direction of the vertical.

Based on the research insights initial conceptual models were created and explored in group and individual sessions with consumers and service providers to establish if the proposed vertical was desirable, feasible and achievable. As the concept took shape rough prototypes were designed and progressively developed through an iterative process of design a bit, test it, design a bit etc.

Each progressive iterative cycle of design and validation incorporated the work of many areas of the business – Interactive Consumer Experience, IT and Marketing were just a few. In fact the most challenging and innovative aspect of the brand extension was the requirement for a cross-functional, multi-disciplinary team to work seamlessly together to create the vertical.

Extending the company’s flagship brand into a vertical touched every part of the business and challenged each part to work together in new and highly collaborative ways. The vertical, launched in 2006, is an achievement but the forging of cross-functional ways of working which underpinned it are also a source of highly valuable innovation for the company.¹⁰

Trend 3: Respondents as co-creators

The Design discipline has long recognised the value of structured participation by consumers in the design process e.g., participatory and collaborative design techniques for websites developed in the last 30 years.

Market researchers have been spurred by the advent of Web 2.0 to work in a similar way by tapping into collaborative social networks e.g., insight or discussion about purchase decision making generated over a number of days or weeks via blogs, forums and bulletin boards.

Personal devices and the World Wide Web increasingly challenge the traditional role of marketers (or any company representative) as custodians of a brand. The diversity of consumer-to-consumer interaction and the credibility consumers assign to it mean that collaboration and co-creation with consumers in relation to brand is essential rather than optional.

The dynamic nature of consumers contribution is encouraging the use of mix-and-merge formats in which a combination of activities explore, understand and measure e.g., insights from blogs followed by face-to-face interviews and focus groups.

Trend 4: Managing brands with channel complexity

Think back to our earlier discussion about the relationship between brand and use interfaces,

...branding, a key aspect of marketing, is also a key aspect of the success of user-interfaces.

The digital medium and its related channels promise much but challenge us for two main reasons:

- 1) The digital medium provides a direct experience of brand,
- 2) Branding is more complex and brand competition is greater depending on the channel e.g., wireless and device/s eg smart mobile phone used.

Direct Experience of Brand

Users attribute emotions directly from their experience and a direct experience affects their perception of brand. Research shows that a “good” experience in a website translates to “good” brand perception.¹¹ What constitutes good experience however goes well beyond traditional ideas of aesthetic attractiveness in brand presentation.

Brand is created quite differently in direct experiences as opposed to indirect experiences e.g., advertising in print, billboards, non-interactive TV commercials. Direct experience can be subdivided into three parts: physical perception (visual, aural, tactile), actual use (usability) and value (usefulness).

Consider a website as an example of direct experience. It is easy to see that the choice and presentation of visual elements like images affect our physical perception but is there more to the interface than meets the eye? The software interface is visual however it also has a significant impact on usability (both perceived and actual) because visual design elements affect both aesthetics and usability at the same time. Hence visual (or any sensory) design in user interfaces must address both usability and aesthetics in order to create a “good” experience.

A “good” experience also refers to how successful a user is in achieving their goals e.g., at a clothing website could users find information about items including what size to order, cost and availability. Research shows that users were more engaged and successful when sites provided functionality that supported them to achieve their goals e.g., a chart of clothing sizes versus no chart.¹²

A user interface may contain visual elements, text content and interactive elements e.g., website menu items, search facility, browse categories, action buttons, size chart etc. Interactive elements have multiple dimensions i.e., visual, usability and usefulness.

Text content is also multi-dimensional. Its visual attributes like size, font and layout affect both physical perception and usability. It is often an end goal for users and a key determinant of usefulness. In addition text conveys less tangible aspects of an experience e.g., tone or voice of the site. The combination of creative elements such as imagery and text is often regarded as a vital means to create brand coherence across channels:

It can be argued that usefulness has a greater impact on direct experience and brand perception than usability. Research has shown people will put up with usability problems when a product or service is considered useful e.g., a slow download speed was tolerated because people found it so compelling to have TV content on their mobile phone. Conversely no amount of good usability can recover a product that is perceived as useless.¹³

Interaction design of a user interface must address all three dimensions of direct experience to create a “good” experience.

Increased complexity of branding: new approaches

Branding in more recent channels e.g., wireless digital can be extremely complex due to the large number of players involved and the constraints of the devices used.

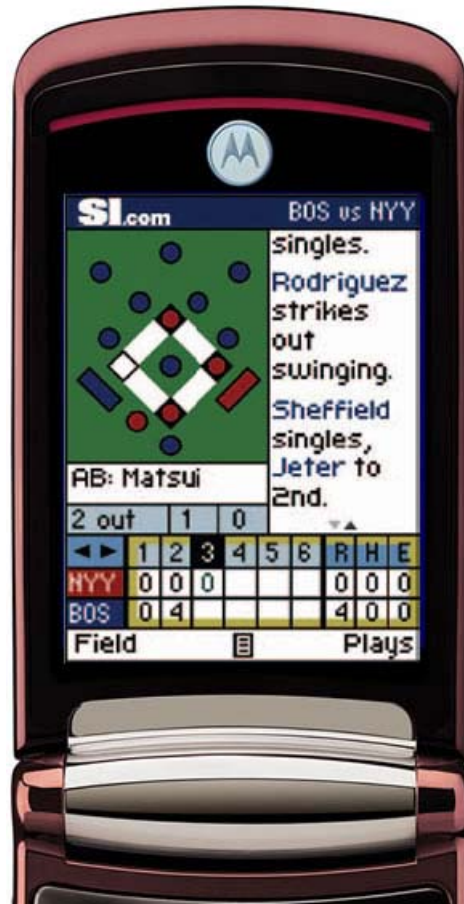
Rondeau¹⁴ reports on providing live sports action to a variety of mobile phones.

In delivering this application the Sports Illustrated mSports brand had to coexist on the device along with the brands of a partner, cell carrier and phone manufacturer.

Given the design constraints for mobile interfaces e.g., screen size this situation created branding complexity.

The mSports team chose to minimise usability problems by keeping the user interface as simple as possible. Visual branding was kept to an absolute minimum with only small brand signifiers on screen (SI.com) and larger elements on the loading screen.

Integrate likely elements e.g., branded content, like merchandising and advertising, into the mSports application and the brand competition becomes intense. Now consider the potential for future addition of a variety of sports on a variety of devices used in a variety of settings and the brand challenges become extreme.



Based on this experience Rondeau has explored the relationship between branding and the design of mobile applications. He proposes general strategies for branding of mobile applications.

Branding Mobile Applications - General Strategies:

1. Provide a positive direct experience by creating an application that is first useful and then usable,
2. Further enhance the experience by making the application aesthetically attractive,
3. Use visual brand signifiers to leverage an established brand or co-brand.

In addition Rondeau sorts mobile devices into separate categories based on key design constraints and proposes branding strategies appropriate to a category rather than dealing with each device separately.

Categories for mobile devices

	Single Purpose	Multipurpose	“Enhanced” Mobile Phone
Devices	Digital music player, digital video player, portable GPS device, and “basic” mobile phones	PDA, Blackberry, and smart phone	Mobile phones that allow third-party applications
Primary uses	One	Multiple	Multiple
Input mechanisms	Limited	Robust	Limited
Device variation	Little or none it	Minor	Major
Brand competition	None	Major	Major
Third-party software	No	Yes	Yes

To illustrate how these categories can assist branding strategy consider a single purpose device e.g., iPod over which the manufacturer has total control. Since the whole product embodies the brand, visual branding can be kept to a minimum in the application interface.

In contrast a Blackberry which falls into the Multi-purpose category is created by multiple parties (platform developers, device manufacturers and software developers) all responsible for their part which introduces brand competition. Fortunately Blackberries have a limited number of platforms. Since platforms often have hardware specifications this reduces the amount of variation across devices (compared to mobile phones). This in turn simplifies the interface design. The affects of consumers perception about each brand on the other is unknown and may be complex however at least the design side of the equation is relatively straight-forward.

The approach put forward by Rondeau shows the importance of integrating Design and Marketing perspectives to chart complex, new branding territory.

Implications of Brand Research Trends for Marketers and Designers

Changes in the understanding and complexity of branding challenge us all to innovate. Working with a cross-discipline awareness is a flexible, strategic way to move forward. Here are some tips to achieve this:

Tips for effective brand innovation:

1. Be alert to differences in perspective and the complexity of new channels,
2. Cultivate respect and understanding of disciplines other than your own,
3. Tolerate ambiguity and confusion more than you usually would,
4. Be willing to try “new” approaches. An approach may be new to you but well established and credentialed in another discipline e.g., User Centred Design (UCD) has informed Design professionals for more than 20 years.

Where the action is now

The action in brand research is at the intersection between disciplines, notably Marketing and Design.

Case Study – Research at the intersection 2007

In 2007 a category-leading Australian online company that wanted to express its brand values on one of its subsidiary websites invited us to research how best to achieve this goal.¹⁵

The research was designed in close consultation with the Site Producer, Designer and Marketing Manager to elicit key, relevant experiences of target users and the emotions and values they assigned to the experience i.e., their meaning-making process.

The research aim was to interact primarily with the right brain to explore use of imagery, voice and tone in relation to site brand values to inform:

- site tone and voice,
- imagery selection and treatment approach,
- site colour palette.

The research devised stimulus and tools to elicit individual experience (e.g., collage pre-workshop) within a group setting in order to gain the rigor of a larger sample size.

Based on analysis of intensive outputs from the workshops six user-experience profiles were identified. Each profile contained users with a **shared experience of:**

- education & training,
- world of work,
- life-stage & sense of self; and,
- most importantly similar emotion states and needs based on key, relevant experience

Eliciting meaning making – the approach

Participants were asked to create a collage of their experience of seeking and choosing education and training in the week before their workshop. This process enabled them to reconnect with their experience focusing on their emotions, values and goals.

During the workshop a series of image sets were progressively disclosed. A rapid interaction during which each individual drew and wrote their instant reactions to the imagery and then verbalised it to the group was established. Text headlines were progressively overlaid on the imagery and reactions to it were elicited in a similar way.

As the workshop progressed the images and text were presented several times to hone in on which, if any, resonated with target users given their experience and the meaning they had assigned to it.

Exploring the gap between user perception and brand DNA

Finally the brand was revealed to participants and the impact of this revelation was explored. Each individual selected images and text which they felt fitted the brand and chose words to describe how they perceived the brand.

Comparative analysis of image and text choices, before and after the brand was revealed to participants, identified three trends indicating certain underlying tensions in the nature of the experience.

A potential gap between perceptions and desired brand values was identified. One of the brand values proposed by the company did not resonate with participants well. Adopting that brand value in site imagery and voice could potentially have a significant negative impact on users.

This case study provides an example of how brand research can engage in checking consumers experience against brand DNA. As Moet Hennessy state:

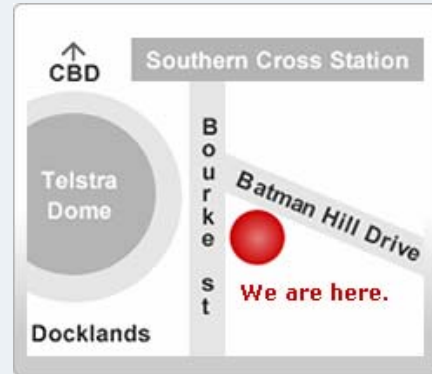
... we strongly felt that the best tool for guiding brand strategy is not directly what consumers think about brands, but an analysis of the gaps between their perceptions and the desired brand values, expressed in the brand essence (DNA), that the client is trying to communicate.¹⁶

Symplicit provides consultancy services in customer observation that can assist you to gain insights for innovation. Drawing on our unique toolset of eye-tracking technology, usability lab and field research techniques we support your customer focus with relevant options for the lifecycle stage you are working on.

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¹⁶ Cross reference⁶