

SUPERBRAND. SO WHAT?

Biffa was recently recognised as a UK business Superbrand. But what does this mean and how should a brand use this information within its own commercial activities?

From the outset I should state that Biffa is not a sexy brand, and it certainly doesn't operate in a sexy sector, and yet for the 11th consecutive year Biffa was identified in the annual Superbrands index as the UK's No.1 brand in the Recycling & Waste Management category. As a brand guardian it would be all too easy to congratulate oneself on a job well done. Sit back, take it easy – safe in the knowledge that your brand is king. And that's the danger. Remaining ahead requires careful management and even more planning. Here we will discuss the Biffa brand amongst its competitive set and its relevance in customer facing marketing.

So, what is a Superbrand and how is that determined?

Firstly, it's worth noting that businesses can't apply or pay to be considered for Superbrand status. Your brand is either known, or it isn't. A panel of independent business and marketing professionals are asked to judge and then score brands against three factors: Quality, Reliability & Distinction. The whole process is overseen by The Centre for Brand Analysis (TCBA) who ask everyone involved in voting to consider the following definition:

“A Superbrand has established the finest reputation in its field. It offers customers significant emotional and/or tangible advantages over its competitors, which customers want and recognise.”

The lists are then published every year, for both Consumer and Business brands. Et voilà: Superbrands.

So, Biffa came top in its category for the 11th consecutive year. Great. Well done Biffa. However, arguably of greater significance is where Biffa appeared in the overall Superbrand Official Rank – the list of the top 1,500 business brands in the UK. This is the real test of brand strength, not just in terms of brand awareness, but proximity to its nearest rivals. Biffa landed just outside the top 100 (106 to be precise) of all business brands in the UK. The nearest competitor brand was closer to 200 (179 to be precise), and the third placed brand ranked at a distant 729. [In case you're wondering what the best performing Business Superbrands were, I'll list the Top 20 at the end of the article.]

Again, before we crack open a new tin of Quality Street we really need to consider what all of this actually means. Spoiler Alert: It will only mean something if we can translate it into something meaningful for our customers. It's also worth noting that just because a brand may rank above its competitors does not guarantee it is somehow superior, or that it will remain in the top spot. Brands of all shapes and sizes require careful management to stay ahead, more of which later.

To really understand what this means for Biffa we need to consider some relevant history.

Firstly, the Biffa brand has existed for over 100 years therefore for the current brand guardians to try and take credit for an annual Superbrand position would be disingenuous. In Biffa's case we also need to separate the



Brand (what our products and services stand for and how we articulate that) from the Branding (the visual identity).

Let's start with the Branding. Biffa perhaps has an unfair advantage here because we are absolutely everywhere. I would argue that we are the most recognisable brand in the sector simply because our bins and trucks are more visible than any other (Biffa bins and trucks appear in 95% of all UK postcodes, which is far more than any of our competitors). In that respect Biffa is virtually, if not quite literally, a high-street name. Furthermore, our predecessors in the 1960s did a great job of designing a unique typeface for the Biffa logo, then rolled out the distinctive bright red bins and trucks for which Biffa is now famous. Sure there's been the odd nip and tuck along the way, but the core design remains true to this day. All current and future marketeers are merely custodians of branding; our job is to protect, enhance and evolve. The Biffa brand is recognisable because it has a personality, longevity and consistency. It's visually memorable and distinctive too.

However, branding is only part of the story. What use is a great design if it doesn't stand for anything or connect with the people who matter most – our customers?

Ours is a highly competitive and sometimes commercially aggressive sector. For example, when trying to win new SME business, there's no question that being the most memorable brand in the sector helps. Being top of mind when a consumer starts a web search can go a long way. It's therefore no surprise that many of our competitors

attempt to piggyback the strength of Biffa brand awareness when they set up their Pay-per-click (PPC) bid terms. Why wouldn't you do this? Sadly there's no law against it in PPC advertising, fortunately there is in web dev/SEO content marketing. If you've got zero or limited brand awareness and want to pick up some instant traffic, why not try and steal a bit from the biggest name in town? By the way, if you're reading this and bid for 'Biffa' – we're flattered, thank you.

However, true brand awareness, reputation and trust must be earned. Organising your products or services to deliver against the needs of your customers, then aligning your brand to that is the very essence of great brand and product marketing. Sounds simple? Should be easy? Far from it.

Our business is very diverse: multi-channel, multi-sector, national and regional, multiple product streams, operating in a wider industry that often does its best to confuse or complicate (just try asking a group of people if you can actually recycle a Coffee Cup). Ultimately you must truly understand what your customer actually wants and expects. There's no point in guessing at it either, you need to ask them, then respond accordingly. Crucially, you can't just identify what your customer wants then adjust your marketing to suit. If your product offer isn't actually delivering against customer needs, your marketing can say whatever it wants – but it won't work.

In the mid 1990s Sainsbury's did some research which told them that potential customers thought they were expensive. The

solution – a new strapline and TVC – “Sainsbury's, where good food costs less”. Sorted. Well, not quite. The problem was no-one believed it. Sure, some popular everyday items were reduced in price, but the overall impression at the checkout remained the same. Put simply, temporary window dressing does not work. Changing entrenched customer perceptions requires much more than a marketing campaign. Marketing must be aligned to commercial and operational performance – and completely based around customer satisfaction.

So, having a powerful brand is a good thing, but does it guarantee success? Can being a Superbrand help to attract, win and retain customers?

I guess the answer to these questions will depend on who we ask. If we spoke to the former Marketing Directors from Nokia, Kodak, Toys R Us, Blockbuster, Woolworths (I could go on) – they may have a different response to their counterparts currently occupying the Top 100 UK Superbrand positions.

Richard Shotton works at Manning Gottlieb OMD, one of the most decorated media agencies in the history of the IPA Effectiveness Awards. Interestingly their website currently states that they are “Ranked the No.1 Media Agency in Europe by WARC 100 – 2018”. The WARC 100 is an annual ranking of the world's best marketing campaigns and companies.

Richard is interested in the subject of



behavioural science and how it can be applied to advertising and marketing. In his book 'The Choice Factory' he outlines some simple experiments undertaken to test the effectiveness of social proof in business. In one experiment 300 respondents were shown images of a fictitious beer brand and were told that it was launching in the UK. "Half were told about the origin of the ingredients and half were told the same story but with the additional information that it was South Africa's most popular beer. In the second scenario, consumers were twice as likely to want to try it." In another experiment, a pub in South London agreed to place a small sign on the bar indicating which beer was the week's best-selling product. It boosted sales by a factor of 2.5 compared to an average week, and when other factors were removed it actually represented a doubling of the proportion of sales.

But what happens outside the confines of academic experimentation? Do real world brands use the same tactics?

From alcohol we move to the really hard stuff - tea. We Brits love a cup of tea.



Our voracious appetite for consuming tea precedes our reputation around the globe. The marketing team at Unilever are clearly aware of this reputation and are prepared to tap into it. Packs of PG Tips sold in international markets are prominently displayed with the message "Britain's No.1 Tea Brand". The inference being - if it's good enough for a nation of 53 million

tea crazed Brits - it should be good enough for you.

Unilever are not the exception. Brands across the world realise the power that existing customers hold in helping to influence others. Advocacy and social proof can convert as powerful trust signals; peer-to-peer evidence of how your product experience is actually delivering against its promise. This applies to brands at all stages of maturity - either the new entrant or the established Superbrand. In the case of the latter there's no getting away from the fact that longevity and significant volumes of happy customers tends to translate into trust. And guess what, you tend to pay a premium for this. Consumers will continue to buy the products they trust, and aspire to the premium brands that deliver on quality. Marketeers

will continue to remind us of how wise we've been in our purchasing decision - sometimes subtly, sometimes directly - asserting their dominance, reminding us that their product is No.1. There's safety in numbers you see. Fear, uncertainty and doubt are well trodden paths for advertising copywriters. The antidote being security. "Nobody ever got fired for buying IBM".

IBM remains a Superbrand to this day. Crucially though they've constantly evolved to remain relevant and succeed. For your business to excel, and therefore your brand, you must offer an end-to-end customer experience which consistently meets and often exceeds expectations. It must evolve too. Some of the brands listed above are either extinct or a mere shadow of their former self. Did they base their offer around known customer satisfaction drivers? Were they prepared or even able to respond in time to the threats heading in their direction?

The message is clear: understand your customers, deliver against their expectations, then build your brand to succeed. Superbrands who get it right





can absolutely exert their position to sell more, lose less and become even stronger. Superbrands without the requisite insight and direction will very quickly become super failures.

Let's return to the point of the sexy brand and the sexy sector – whether it's a premium wrist watch, or a premium waste management service – good marketing is good marketing regardless of either of these. Recycling and the environment has never been more prominent in the press or the public conscience than right now: *#lattelevy*, *#singleuseplastics*, *#coffeecups*, *#carrierbags*, *#drinkingstraws*, *#blueplanet*, *#circulareconomy*, *#resourcerevolution*, *#greenfatigue*, *#plasticattack*, *#upcycle*, *#recycle*. You name it, there's a hash tag for that. Some of this is jargon, some of it is real and really matters. Our job is to seamlessly manage the waste that our customers produce for the best outcome. Marketing clearly plays an important role in this, both during acquisition and throughout the life of the relationship.

In many ways being the No.1 brand is actually irrelevant. Does it help to validate a certain vanity, perhaps, and there's no question that Biffa is proud to be the No.1 Superbrand in our sector. But do we come to work each day thinking: 'Marketing this brand is a doddle, we're already No.1 so why try harder?' – absolutely not. If anything it makes our determination

and focus even stronger. We will continue to manage our position and reputation to best effect. Our tone of voice will remain down to earth, our insight will be authoritative, our presence will be wide-ranging.

Brands should be considered as living and breathing entities. Brands need to evolve and stay relevant. Most of all they need to make a meaningful connection. That connection and how it is articulated is likely to be different for every brand, but understanding it is the key to success. What's most important is what you do with your brand to keep your customers satisfied and coming back for more. That is a different subject for another time.

Top 20 Business Superbrands 2018

1. Apple
2. BP
3. Microsoft
4. British Airways
5. Emirates
6. Google
7. PayPal
8. Shell
9. Visa
10. Mastercard
11. American Express
12. London Stock Exchange Group
13. Virgin Atlantic
14. IBM
15. JCB
16. Samsung
17. GlaxoSmithKline
18. Bosch
19. Barclaycard
20. Intel



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