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# **Redefining Brand Salience Using Memory Theory and Implications for Measurement**

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## **Abstract**

The concept of brand salience, or brand accessibility in memory, has been prevalent in the area of brand research for several decades. Brand salience has been driven by memory theory and psychological research, but debate has continued over the structure of memory systems, the way in which consumers undertake memory search, and what they do with brand information once it is retrieved. With the rise to prominence of brand equity, brand salience has been subsumed into the awareness category, as an operationalisation of recalling information. This paper looks at redefining brand salience and proposes new methods for measuring brand salience.

## **Introduction**

The typical definition of brand salience is “the prominence or level of activation of a brand in memory” (Alba and Chattopadhyay, 1986). This is an operational definition of brand salience that refers to the ease of accessibility of the brand in a consumer’s memory. In order to make a brand salient, a manager must make this brand one of the first recalled by consumers in a search of internal, long-term memory. This paper addresses the current definitions of brand salience, the relationship between brand salience and developments in memory theory, and finally addresses the need for new measures of brand salience.

## **Definitions of Brand Salience**

Embedded within the framework of brand equity (Keller, 1993) is the concept of brand salience, which Keller (2001, p3) defines as “aspects of the awareness of the brand e.g., how often and easily is the brand evoked under various situations and circumstances?” Keller (2001) proposes a model of customer based brand equity in which brand salience is the building block to brand equity, where a salient brand possesses both depth and breadth of awareness.

Definitions of brand salience range from accessibility of the brand in memory as evidenced by recall (Posovac et. al., 1997; Haley and Case, 1979; Nedungadi and Hutchinson, 1985; Axelrod, 1968), associative strength (Fazio, Powell and Williams, 1989), recall position (Miniard, Unnava and Bhatla, 1989; Miller and Berry, 1998) or position in the consumers consideration set (Ehrenberg, Barnard and Scrivens, 1997; Leong, Ang and Tham, 1996). A further refinement of the definition has salience viewed as prominence (Pan and Kosicki, 1997; Eastman and Newton, 98; Alba and Chattopadhyay, 1985; 1986).

There has also been debate about the difference between brand awareness and brand salience based on recognition versus recall (Alba and Hutchinson, 1987; Baker et al 1986; Rossiter and Percy, 1987). This is related to stimulus based (Lynch and Srull, 1982) versus memory-based evocation. Memory based evocation refers to top-of-mind awareness or salience (Axelrod, 1968; Nedungadi and Hutchinson, 1985). Nedungadi (1990) also posited that brand salience is not only engaged by cues but situations, which themselves may act as cues to the

consumer. Alba and Chattopadhyay (1985) refer to absolute awareness (brands that are known or recognizable) and situational awareness (brands recalled at a particular time).

Increased salience or top of mind awareness is important for a brand in order to increase retrieval probability of that brand in consumer choice. Consumers use the information most salient to them when problem solving, for example, making a purchase decision (Wyer and Srull, 1989; Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; Domke, Shah and Wackman, 1998; Salancik & Conway, 1975). Consumers use most accessible information in choice situations, due to the reduced information processing effort required on behalf of the consumer (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974; Pryor & Kriss, 1977).

Salience will also have an effect on consumer judgement, as is shown in several studies where consumers make judgements based on whatever information is salient to them at the point of time that the decision is made (Salancik & Conway, 1975; Pryor & Kriss, 1977). Research has shown that salient information gains disproportionate amounts of attention and is recalled in disproportionate amounts (Alba, Hutchinson and Lynch, 1991). Salient brands are more likely to be perceived on a crowded shelf (Pechmann & Stewart, 1990).

### **Memory Theory**

Our understanding of salience can be enhanced by a broader look at developments in the field of cognitive psychology. Retrieval from memory is the first stage in the brand being considered, which is an essential step to the brand being chosen (Holden and Lutz, 1992). The Associative Network Model of Semantic Memory (ANMM) proposed by Quillian (1968), and refined by Collins and Loftus (1975), deals with the traces established in memory every time information is coded into long term memory. According to the ANMM, there are two types of association that can occur with information in semantic memory, horizontal and vertical associations (Brown, 1981). Horizontal association occurs when activation generated by a cue radiates out from the presented item, along pathways to other connected items, making identification easier. Vertical associations are between items and their category and are the locus of inhibition effects. Bettman (1979) proposed that the establishment of a trace is the establishment of links in memory between the new piece of information and information already stored in memory (nodes). Links between nodes have strength, which represents the importance of the node to the meaning of the concept. The associations between nodes, as determined by the links, are by their very nature, semantic (Bettman, Johnson and Payne, 1991).

Anderson (1983) proposed the theory of spreading activation, where there is a spreading out from the activated node, which activates other, relevant nodes. Once the cued concept has been activated, the activation will spread to other concepts linked to that cue, activating links to other related nodes. Accessibility in this model is seen as the strength of the cue object's link to nodes within long-term memory (Holden and Lutz, 1992). Retrieval of information from long-term memory is dependent on the strength of the associations between the activated nodes. Cues are an important factor, where depending on the type of cue used, the retrieval process may be facilitated, as in the case of single category cues (Nickerson, 1985) or inhibited, as with multiple cues (Roediger, 1973). In reality, consumers are rarely presented with a single category cue to trigger recall, but are more likely to be presented with multiple cues (brands), thus activating multiple nodes and linkages in memory and increasing the probability of recall.

## **Sampling with Replacement**

The major method of information retrieval is by sampling with replacement. Proposed by Rundus (1973), sampling with replacement states that once information has been retrieved from memory it is replaced and available for further retrieval. Once retrieved, information is more accessible and may cause inhibition of recall of other pieces of information (Roediger, 1974). When consumers retrieve information from memory, the information retrieved depends not only on accessibility but also on relevance (Baker and Lutz, 1987) and diagnosticity (Feldman and Lynch, 1988). A salient brand will not only be relevant to the problem but assist consumers, to some extent with solving the problem for which the retrieval process was activated. It can be seen that retrieval is a competitive process, where information recall depends not only on the cue but also on the strength and number of related links to the concepts to be retrieved (Collins and Loftus, 1975).

## **Consideration Sets**

Brand salience has been strongly correlated with brand choice (Haley and Case, 1979; Axelrod, 1968; Nedungadi and Hutchinson, 1985). This is because before making choice decisions, consumers rely on internal memory stores. The most recently recalled, and most prominent brand will be the most likely choice. Due to the limited size of the consideration set, a salient alternative will have approximately a one in seven chance of being selected in the final decision, assuming a seven brand consideration set. Brand salience influences share and equity as brands that come to mind on an unaided basis are likely to be in the consumers' consideration sets and therefore have a higher probability of recall and purchase (Miller and Georgiou, 1996, Sutherland and Galloway, 1981). A salient brand will also have greater accessibility within the consideration set, and thus have a greater chance of recall from within the consideration set, whilst at the same time reducing the amount of space available for competing brands (Alba and Chattopadhyay, 1985).

Due to the limited nature of information processing in human memory, consumers typically make their choice decisions from a small set of alternatives (Hauser and Wernerfelt, 1990) and make choice decisions rapidly despite a wide range of brands on offer (Dickson and Sawyer, 1987). This is because of the trade-off that consumers make between the amounts of information required as opposed to the amount of time available to process the task

The development of the consideration set is important to the retrieval process, as the brand with the greatest awareness may not be retrieved or reside long in the consideration set due to negative association that the brand carries (Nedungadi, 1990; Howard and Sheth, 1969). A salient brand will carry positive associations, enabling it to gain a prominent position in the consideration set, in the transfer of information from long-term to short-term memory.

The definition of brand salience should also recognise the difference between available and accessible information. All information is theoretically available from memory, but only a fraction is accessible for retrieval purposes. Retrieval of brands for consideration is an important part of the choice process, and may indeed be given more weight than the evaluation stage for low involvement goods/services as evaluation may be very brief or heuristics used. Consumers develop a number of heuristics, and one may be to choose a brand that they have heard of or recall first, the reason being due to familiarity and decreased risk and effort involved in the decision making process after this (Bettman, Johnson and Payne, 1991; Deshpande, Hoyer and Jeffries, 1982; Deshpande & Hoyer 1983).

Keller (2001, p4) recognises brand salience as the first step in the model of brand equity, indicating that a “salient brand has both depth (ease of recall) and breadth (when brand is recalled) of awareness.” Thus a salient brand must have more than mere awareness and the measure of brand salience must be more than just simple recall or recognition but take into account a richer set of associations, situational factors, time, recall position and cues.

Brand salience is also likely to affect different consumers to different extents. It is most effective on product novices and other vulnerable segments of the population. Experts should tend to remember non-salient information more readily. Novices on the other hand should tend to find it harder to challenge advertisers’ claims and will preferentially recall salient information, especially after delay (Alba et al. 1991).

Gardial & Biehal (1985) found that at higher levels of accessibility involvement did not affect choice processing measures. In the instance where information was highly accessible in consumers’ memory, subjects with higher involvement levels undertook less processing overall, which means that they have simplified the process more effectively. Involvement, however, did affect the number of attempts to retrieve information from memory on behalf of consumers; consumers with lower involvement levels had a lower number of unsuccessful recall attempt before search was terminated (Alba & Chattopadhyay 1986). This finding indicates that a salient brand has a much higher chance of being recalled and chosen by consumers, as well as increasing the likelihood of a salient brand inhibiting recall of competing brands.

### **Measuring Brand Salience**

The role of brand salience in the development of models of brand equity needs to be reconsidered as it is currently subsumed into the awareness construct. Awareness does not adequately capture the notion of brand salience. Salience is not only a necessary precursor to brand equity but also forms an integral part of the brand equity model, a brand with higher equity will be more salient, with more associations and stronger links between associations, allowing greater accessibility. This leads to better and richer associations and thus a more prominent recall position. Brand salience *does* contribute to the concept of brand equity but needs to be given more prominence and the measures and definition of brand salience need to be reconsidered to capture this.

A more comprehensive definition of brand salience would utilise developments in memory theory, such as the associative network model of memory. This would provide a seamless integration of brand salience into the model of brand equity. A stronger measure of brand salience needs to be developed. Current measures of brand salience are too limited and inadequate, measuring only brand recall, but ignoring richer information that is involved with salient brands. Current measures of brand salience do not distinguish adequately between brand salience and brand awareness, nor do they capture the breadth and depth of awareness that a salient brand possesses.

Due to the nature of brand salience and the operationalisation of memory, for a brand to be salient, consumers will recall the brand name with rich associations. When a brand name with negative associations is salient, it will be recalled to the rejected set, but will not affect the overall number of brands recalled by a consumer. When developing a measure of brand salience, developments in memory theory must be taken into account. Thus, a measure of

brand salience will incorporate vertical and horizontal associations, and will take into account whether the consumer is a novice or an expert in the field, as perceived level of knowledge can affect the consumers' ability to recall information, and exhaustiveness of search processes.

Retrieval of information from memory is a competitive process, brands are not recalled in isolation, but actively compete for places in the consumer's consideration set. Therefore, asking consumers to assess all brands at one time is a more appropriate way to measure brand salience than asking consumers to consider brands on an individual basis, as has been traditionally done. Brand salience is also a function of recall, but with brand salience, the importance is both in times for recall, as well as position of recall. With the limited size of the consideration set, a brand recalled early and quickly will have an advantage over all other brands. In low involvement purchases, with situational pressure, the first brand recalled by consumers may be the brand chosen, because brand salience is strongly linked to choice. Therefore, a metric measure of time of recall, as well as position of recall should be put in place in order to gain a more practical measure of brand salience.

### **Conclusion**

Brand salience has often been confused with or replaced by brand awareness. Brand salience plays an important role in consumer choices, in determining the amount of attention a consumer pays to competing brands, and to developing the equity of a brand. A better understanding of the nature of brand salience, differentiating it from brand awareness is required. Current measures of brand salience are inadequate as they test only position of recall, using only a single category cue, which does not reflect reality. A comprehensive measure of brand salience will take into account not only the recall position and recognition of a brand name, but will also take into account the associations that a brand has, and the way in which consumers access the information, as well as the nature of the cues that trigger the search for salient information. A more robust measure of brand salience will take into account the way in which consumers recall information to memory, and the order and the depth of information recalled. Brand recall is a competitive process and the measurement of brand salience should reflect this. This paper has presented discussion of the definition of brand salience, developments in memory theory and proffered ideas to develop a more comprehensive method for measuring brand salience.

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