
Keeping Brands Strong When Going Global



By Martin Roll , Business and Brand Strategist, Founder of Martin Roll Company (INSEAD MBA '99D)

Consistent global positioning is the cornerstone of any successful global brand growth strategy. Without it brands risk becoming irrelevant before they even get established in international markets.

Scaling a local brand into a regional or global powerhouse is one of the most difficult challenges many organisations face. Corporate history is littered with expansion attempts which failed to survive the complexities and competitiveness of global markets. But it also contains the remarkable success stories of small local brands which went on to become globally recognisable icons and significant drivers of value and growth for their organisations.

The majority of recognised global brands (such as GE, Nokia, Microsoft, Nokia, Toyota, Nestle, Coca Cola, Disney, IBM) all maintained a consistent brand image, driven by holistic positioning and strict adherence to a system of rules and guidelines.

Establishing a homogenous brand image

Consistent positioning is by far one of the strongest enablers of global brand growth. In the late 20th century when organisations like IBM, GE, Disney and Coca Cola were establishing themselves across the globe, their focus was driven by the desire to establish a homogenous brand image in the minds of their consumers. This is even more crucial in today's world where global consumers are constantly bombarded by brand messages (local and global), and exposed to a multitude of brands in their travels.

Today's consumers read and form opinions about brands online and from social media, and have the potential to become strong brand advocates or critics with the ability to influence perceptions through their online and offline conversations. With this in mind companies looking to expand internationally must be consistent with their brand messaging and positioning to maximise their strength in all markets.

Keeping on-message

There are rich success stories of global brand building. The luxury hotel group, Aman Resorts, slowly expanded into the international market through a strategy of consistent positioning and excellent brand experience which it marketed through "Aman-junkies"- ultra-wealthy consumers who spread the word about the brand's position, and their experience, among their networks. Repeat visits at Aman resorts are as high as 50 percent. Starting off as an Asia-based hospitality company, it is now setting up a sizeable office in London, as its resorts build up clientele outside Asia.

Smoothie and juice manufacturer, Innocent Drinks started off in the UK, before Coca Cola (in a highly controversial move) bought a majority stake, bringing with it significant marketing and distribution muscle. The company navigated the complex waters of international expansion by taking strategic decisions on point-of-sale channels and retail placement, without diluting brand positioning, thus strengthening its brand equity. Innocent Drinks' products are now available in 13 countries across Europe and, while it is not yet global, by 2010 it had become Europe's number one smoothie maker.

Telling their own stories

Lifestyle brand, Tory Burch is another example of global expansion success. Its products are very diversified with offerings in 12 categories from clothing to watches. The single thread that cuts across the brand is the concept of storytelling. The personal stories about each product, many of which are named after founder Tory Burch's family and loved ones, drive the brand's

consistent positioning. As collections are refreshed season to season, they always reflect a personal side.

Huawei is another strong success story, building a global brand out of a B2B OEM legacy. In 2015, it surpassed Microsoft as the third biggest mobile phone manufacturer (by the number of mobile phones shipped). The key to its achievement was the consistent positioning of its products as “high technology life changers” for target consumers. The company’s vision, to enrich life through communication, translates into its product offerings and messages. For Huawei, this consistent positioning was also important to counter the poor quality perceptions often associated with China-based manufacturers. The company’s ability to innovate has helped position its products as high technology enablers. Ranked second in terms of global Patent Cooperation Treaty patent applications in 2013, Huawei has over 70,000 employees engaged in Research & Development work.

Touching the hearts and minds of consumers

These examples illustrate the different ways companies have achieved consistent positioning across geographies during global brand expansion; using their brand positioning to overcome challenges and find ways of handling market imperfections. Their successes were due in part to their ability to exhibit patience and perseverance and resist the temptation of entering new markets too early to protect their brand’s positioning.

Having consistent global positioning may not be the only factor that influences global and regional advancement, but it is the cornerstone of all successful growth strategies. Any scaling strategy that has led a local company to become an international icon has always focused on the transitioning of their brands’ core values and positioning for global customers. An understanding of cultural, social, market, regulatory and government factors are important, but none can replace the importance of having a brand that can speak a universal language and touch the hearts and minds of consumers across the world.

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