17   The CSR Brand Positioning Grid

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Key words: Branding, marketing, positioning, external communication, advertising

17.1   Introduction to the model

CSR provides an interesting way to build better brands. The challenge is to find the right balance between CSR and other brand values. The opportunities for integrating CSR in marketing have to be selected carefully. There are subtle differences that can be extremely decisive. The CSR Brand Positioning Grid is a tool that helps define the right balance and determine the importance or role of CSR in developing and building a brand. It offers a framework for deciding how explicitly or implicitly CSR should be expressed and what the relationship with other brand values should be. It can help companies to use CSR to differentiate their products or brands from those of their competitors.

Before developing the brand, its positioning and value proposition (e.g. lowest price, best product, customer intimacy, sustainability champion) need to be defined. This decision reveals the level or importance of CSR within the business strategy.

Most mainstream companies have no ambition to become a sustainability champion. They have chosen another value proposition and CSR is integrated within this strategy. CSR provides the environment within which the value proposition is delivered. This can be a result of different motives. Defensive: because stakeholders demand it and the company wants to avoid possible risks. In this case there is little room for using CSR in branding. Or offensive: CSR is an expression of its identity, it reinforces the business strategy. Only then can it offer opportunities to strengthen the brand and its market position.

In very green-oriented companies, which are often driven by their ideology, the focus on sustainability is the primary choice and could in itself be described as their value proposition. To start from this point influences the business model, the structure, the quality and price of their products etc., and thus the competitiveness of the value proposition they can deliver to their clients. They often operate in niche markets and CSR plays an important role in branding.

The model is derived from a marketing technique, called the means-end chain. This is a method which helps to ascertain the reasons underlying con-

sumers' purchase decisions. It is common practice in advertising and campaign development. The chain consists of:

- Attributes (concrete, often physical or tangible aspects of a product or company: product features, competencies, systems)
- Consequences or benefits (the solutions the product or company offers)
- End values (values people live by; lifestyles)

Benefits and end values provide the answers to one of the most important marketing questions, namely: 'what's in it for me?'. Take Volvo for example; safety is the core of its brand positioning. A means-end chain for Volvo could be: 'a Volvo is equipped with a solid bumper (attributes), which offers me safety (benefit). This is important for me, because I care for my family (end value)'.

Branding has become more complex and subtle in recent years. It is not only about what we sell or about the benefits of our product. Customers also want brands that offer them inspiration. The consumer's choice for a brand is not only based on these three elements. The identity of the company behind the products or brands has become more important and creates preference with consumers. For this reason, the consultancy company b-open has added an element to develop the CSR Brand Positioning Grid: the inspiration that a product or company offers. Inspiration comes from inside. This reflects the 'softer', intangible aspects like philosophy, mission, principles, ideals and shared values.
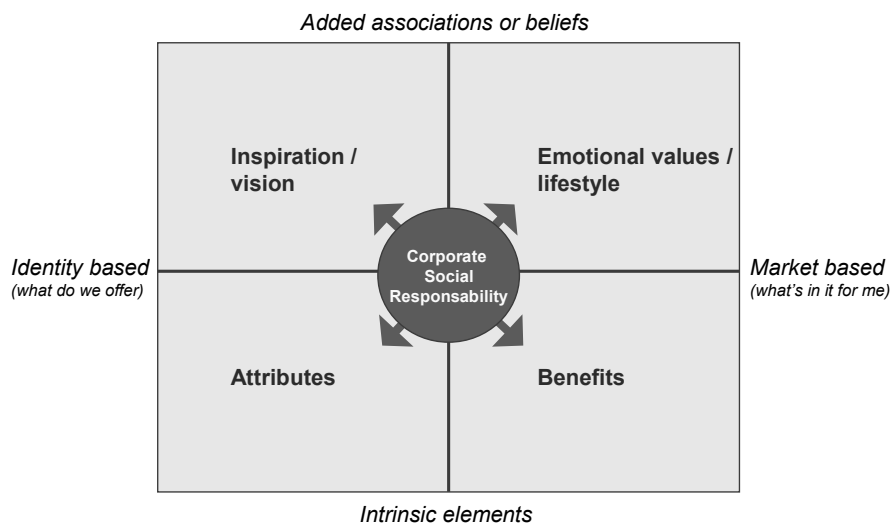
Figure 17.1. The CSR brand positioning grid

17.2   The essence of the model

The four elements are integrated in a quadrant, consisting of two dimensions:

1. Identity based ('what do we offer?') – market based ('what's in it for me?')
2. Intrinsic elements – added associations or beliefs.

The result is four boxes appointed in Figure 17.1.

   In positioning a brand clearly, one should focus on one of these boxes, although a brand becomes stronger and harder to compete with, when it is embedded in more than one box. The grid can be applied in the branding process on three levels, corresponding to three successive stages, as shown in the following chart.
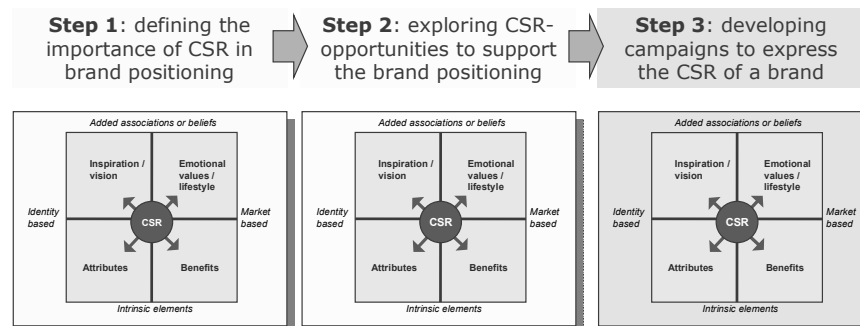

Figure 17.2. Applying the CSR brand positioning grid

17.3   Experiences with this model in practice

The model can be used for developing and building new brands and for monitoring, evaluating and repositioning existing brands. It is a useful tool for exploring relevant CSR-related topics. Furthermore, the model is a practical tool for analysing competitors. It helps identify the available scope for communicating CSR in terms of one's own brand and offers insight into ways of creating a distinctive method or campaign to express CSR. The various stages of the CSR Brand Positioning Grid are explained below, using practical examples and elaborating on the significance of the four boxes.

Defining the importance of CSR in brand positioning

The first stage in using the model is the creation of a brand. The challenge is to choose the right focus for the brand positioning. The CSR Brand Positioning Grid offers a framework to explore the strengths and opportunities for a prod-

uct or company. An inventory was drawn up for an organic food company that included various options:

- The company could simply concentrate on the characteristics of the product: it has an organic or natural composition and doesn't contain any artificial additives (position bottom left), or;

- it could communicate its corporate identity and describe its philosophy or the nature of the production process: that the food is produced in a traditional way, by a family-owned company, where there is a clear focus on animal welfare and the environment (position top left), or;

- the company could consider a more market-based perspective and concentrate on relevant consumer benefits, like quality, health or the good taste of the food (position bottom right), and, finally,

- the company could decide to create a lifestyle brand (position top right), targeting the product, for example, specifically at people with a environmentally-conscious lifestyle, a group who are involved with the well-being of our planet such as the group called the Cultural Creatives. An alternative would perhaps be mothers who care for their family and want food that has not been messed around with. Their lifestyle and values could also offer a valid perspective.

In each box an inventory of all the relevant possibilities should be made. There are only a few examples included above. After putting all relevant options in the four boxes a trade-off process takes place to select the brand positioning. The final choice will be based on criteria such as distinctiveness from competition relevance and attractiveness for the target groups, authenticity and credibility of the claim. For the organic food company, positioning the brand based on its identity (left) may lack the relevance to attract a broader, mainstream audience. Healthy or tasty food may seem more attractive directions. The fact that it is organic would then support this claim. However, it would be of relatively minor importance in its brand positioning, where taste is the decisive factor.

One of the results of this trade-off process may be to promote CSR or related aspects of sustainability to become the core element of the brand positioning. This is only possible for green companies or products which can muster sufficient supporting evidence. As a consequence, the company knows it will attract mostly green consumers and will have to be satisfied with serving a niche market.

However a green company, that want to wants to attract a larger audience, can also choose personal benefits for the consumer, like quality, body care and health, or a lifestyle to position its brand. A brand that has made this shift is the Dutch fair trade brand Max Havelaar, that uses 'max genieten' (= maximum enjoyment) as an advertising theme.

Exploring CSR opportunities to support brand positioning

After defining the positioning and supporting values of the brand, the model can be used to explore relevant CSR aspects for building the brand. This is perhaps obvious for brands that choose a position based on CSR, mostly green-oriented companies, but it also applies to mainstream brands where other values or propositions such as innovation, taste, health, customer orientation, or price leadership are the focal issue.

This is the case for most companies. In this situation the CSR Brand Positioning Grid can be of great value, because it can inspire these companies to find existing or new CSR-related characteristics that support these claims. What is even more important for the implementation of CSR in these companies is that it offers interesting opportunities from a marketing perspective that stimulate the CSR process and really integrate CSR into the business. The Grid was used in a multinational pharmaceutical company that operates in a business-to-business market. The strategic focus was to increase loyalty. This was the starting point for investigating the opportunities. Moving through the four boxes with a CSR perspective an inventory was made of relevant CSR-related topics and issues (internal or external) to support the customer intimacy strategy. One appeared in the mission statement (top left). It included the company objective to enhance the quality of life of patients, an objective it was pursuing with its products. But why not enhance the positioning in other ways and encourage clients (mostly hospitals) to develop ideas to support this cause? The best ideas were then rewarded with a grant. The patients benefit, and at the same time the programme generates sympathy and builds up the loyalty of the hospitals towards their supplier.

Another example is of a telecom supplier whose brand positioning was to offer connectivity to as many people as possible. A CSR consideration inspired them to identify special target groups with social needs, like the disabled, and to develop solutions for them to increase their mobility and safety (market based: bottom right). This added a niche, but commercially interesting, market – and one that also strengthens the brand image.

Developing a campaign to express the CSR of the brand

The third way to use the model, is a more tactical one: to develop a campaign with which to build a sustainable brand. This may be an advertising campaign or an internal communications campaign. This applies particularly to brands with CSR as the core element, but is also valuable for brands that have defined another focus for their brand positioning, yet still see CSR as a relevant supporting or additional brand value.

The challenge is to translate CSR into an attractive and effective key message. The CSR Brand Positioning Grid helps to find the most relevant or distinc-

tive angle (box and subjects in this box) for conveying CSR. This focus is the strategic starting point for the creative development process. Again, the other boxes can offer inspiration, supporting evidence or other relevant information for this angle.

For several years Shell has run corporate advertising campaigns to express its CSR. In the Netherlands they started with a print campaign that explained the dilemmas and philosophy of Shell. The pay off was 'Profit. Principles. Or both'. (identity based: top left). Now they run a corporate campaign which focuses on the sustainable solutions that Shell is exploring or offering on a product level (e.g. cleaner diesel, V-power). They use a testimonial concept, in which clients or other stakeholders give their opinion about these products. They moved in the Grid to a position on the bottom right.

This corporate campaign adds a (sustainable) value and sympathy to the brand and to the product claims in its marketing campaigns such as 'more power for your engine' for Shell V-Power. BP has a different approach. In its marketing campaign for BP Ultimate it has combined an environmental claim with a consumer benefit: 'more power, less pollution'.

17.4 Some do's and don'ts

Marketing is not selling ideology

Traditional CSR companies – i.e. involved in CSR because of the firm conviction of their founders, board members or employees – are often emotionally tied to their identity and principles. They want to sell their ideals. However, that is not the way to reach a mass market. Therefore it is necessary to combine these ideals with the relevant benefits for their clients. Conveying CSR implicitly is often more effective than obvious claims.

Don't hide

Mainstream companies that have achieved a great deal in the field of CSR may miss opportunities in the areas of branding or marketing if they fail to communicate these efforts. This model can help them to find the subtle and relevant perspective.

Co-ordinate corporate and marketing efforts

It is still business practice to treat corporate communications and marketing as two completely separate functions, especially within larger corporations. However, there is a mutual influence between marketing and corporate communications and branding on a product and corporate level. Integration is necessary.

Don't concentrate exclusively on the final consumers

A strong brand positioning is not only aimed at the needs of the customers, but also takes into account the needs of other stakeholders (e.g. employees, NGOs, local communities). Such a positioning is based on a overall brand value or theme that connects with all these groups and from which they can each derive their own value. It should also leave room to differentiate the explanation of the brand positioning to each group. A leading Dutch bank ABN-AMRO uses 'making more possible' as a slogan in their advertising campaign, but it is also the title of their sustainability report.

17.5 Concluding remarks

The CSR Brand Positioning Grid is not a box-ticking exercise. Applying the model requires analytical skills and the ability to collect the right information for the four boxes. The information should be provided by representatives and specialists inside or outside the company. It is also a creative process that requires the judgement, creativity and intuition of the people involved. A well-tried method to achieve this is to arrange working sessions and to discuss the options for defining the role of CSR in branding with management teams or representatives of different management disciplines relating to CSR (e.g. HRM, quality, marketing, buying, operations, sales).

Branding is more than advertising, especially when CSR is at stake. It is about building strong relationships which people value. This is achieved by the way a brand behaves: through its employees, its products, prices, community involvement and its communications. All these elements build the brand and contribute to a brand image. As values like sustainability and trust become more important, so CSR and branding gradually converge. For those companies that embrace CSR, the Brand Positioning Grid is a valuable tool in their objective to 'live their brand' and 'walk their talk'.

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