23plusone

a scientific study on brand appeal

June 2010 | Kim Cramer & Alexander Koene

supported by BR-ND

The short version

Brands are wonderful phenomena. Located in our brain, they evoke all kinds of associations. These can be functional, describing the product category or quality. But also emotional, like feelings and values people experience when using the brand. Some brands are able to touch us. They just 'feel' good. We may even love them, although it is often hard to explain why. They have more 'brand appeal'. Despite a substantive amount of research, limited insight exists into the way brands touch us and ignite our desire.

In 2006, Kim Cramer, PhD and Alexander Koene of BR-ND, in cooperation with market research company Metrixlab, started a scientific research on brand appeal. An extensive project, consisting of a literature study, the development of a measuring instrument, two pilot studies, and a large quantitative study. More than 8000 Dutch respondents profiled over 195 brands in 23 product categories. The central research question: 'Why do some brands simply feel better than others?'.

23plusone

- The degree in which brands feel good (brand appeal) has to do with fundamental human drives, the things people find important life.
- An extensive literature study revealed that there are twenty-four (23plusone) fundamental human drives, like loyalty, status, and sexuality. When they are triggered, we experience a pleasant feeling of wellbeing or happiness.
- Every human being has all twenty-four drives. However, the degree in which drives are important is context dependent. What is very important to someone may be less important to someone else. And what is important today may not be very important tomorrow.
- The twenty-four drives can be divided into five groups: Vitality, Attraction, Self-development, Ambition and Basics.

Results

- The better[1] a brand touches the twenty-four fundamental human drives, the higher the brand appeal
- The better a brand simultaneously triggers drives from the five groups (Vitality, Attraction, Self-development, Ambition and Basics), the higher the brand appeal.

[1] 'Better' is indicated by the degree in which each drive is triggered by a brand, scored on a 5-point Likert scale.

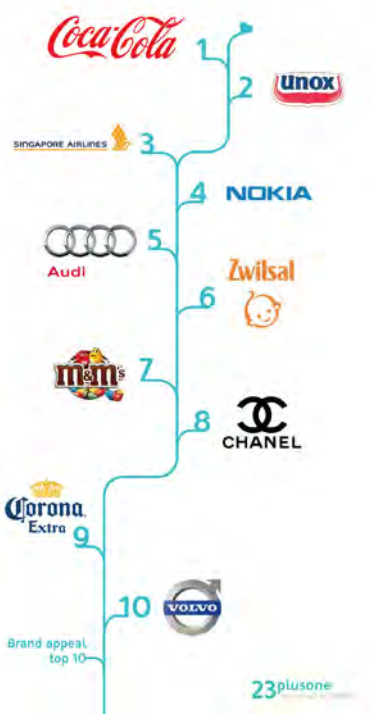
Top 10

- Overall, drives from the groups Vitality (Health and Sportive) and Attraction (Beauty and Sexuality) have the highest relative impact on brand appeal.
- Brands which trigger 'unexpected' drives, deviating from category conformity, increase in brand appeal.
- There are no universal mixing rules. The most effective 'drive cocktail' is category-dependent.
- Brand awareness (the degree in which a person knows the brand), brand expectations (the degree in which a person knows what to expect from the brand) and 23plusone are intertwined concepts influencing brand appeal.
- Brand appeal is a sound marker of brand preference.
- There are few truly appealing brands which exceed their category.

Conclusion

Besides being known and fulfilling expectations, brands have to make a conscious choice which drives they want to touch. The choice does not involve just one drive; the most appealing brands touch many drives, which do not always seem to fit logically. Due to such a paradoxical mix of drives, brands with tension arise. The right tension contributes to a higher brand appeal.

The brands with the highest brand appeal



The brands with the lowest brand appeal

The full story

Creating appealing brands involves a fundamental understanding of the variables that explain brand appeal. In a large scale scientific study by Kim Cramer, PhD and Alexander Koene, both co-owners of BR-ND, it was investigated why some brands are better able to touch people than other brands. The study, called '23plusone', was kicked off in 2006. Results indicate that brand appeal has everything to do with fundamental human drives. Brands that touch certain combinations of those drives are highly seductive. Knowledge about the relationship between brand appeal and emotional responses significantly improves strategic brand development.

Theory and assumptions

Despite a substantive amount of research, limited insight exists into the way brands are able to touch us and ignite our desire. It is known that brand preference is related to factors like positioning, price perception, availability, social influences and personal involvement. However, why some brands simply 'have it', and others do not, is not yet clearly understood.

In branding theory, authors often refer to three basic functions of brands. First, and most obviously, brands help us recognize things. Brands function as virtual sign posts in our brain; they flag the type of product or service. We know, for example, that Nike and Adidas are lifestyle sporting goods, and that Coca Cola and Sprite are beverages. Second, brands steer our expectations. We assume that branded products and services offer a consistent experience. For example, we expect McDonalds to offer the same quality and service all around the world, and that Starbucks coffee tastes the same in every outlet. Third, brands evoke emotional responses. For example, Rolex triggers associations related to status and ambition and Swatch to fun and creativity. It is this third function of brands, the capacity to evoke emotional responses, which is further examined in our study. Ironically, this function that is least known about, presents the single, most powerful way to relevantly distinguish a brand from the competition.

In the practice of branding, things like status and creativity are often referred to as brand values. Such brand values are mostly intuitively and to some extent randomly chosen by brand managers and their advisors, simply because they somehow seem to fit. Our view is that brands do not have values. Brands only exist in our brain, as this is where our experiences with them have created a network of both emotional and functional associations.

What brands can do is touch the things people find important in their lives. Human emotions, motivations, and aspirations - also called drive domains - are the foundation upon which thought processes, decisions and actions are based. Decision making about brands centers on one question: how will this make me feel? Consequently we should not concentrate on so-called

brand values, but on emotional domains that are activated by a brand. It is not just about what the brand represents (e.g. sexiness), but about what is internalized as a desired feeling linked to the brand (feeling sexy when using it). Our hypotheses are based on this thinking. First of all, we assumed that brands that better trigger drive domains are more appealing.

An extensive literature study was conducted to identify human drives. After all, this assumption brings about the question: what are human drives? We define human drives as the things that people find important in life. Therefore, we investigated literature in the fields of philosophy, psychology, sociology, biology, and neurology, and specifically examined studies that have attempted to list human motivations, drives, aspirations, urges, emotions and feelings.

Comparing the outcomes of these studies, we listed unique as well as overlapping drives. We then integrated the overlapping drives and developed a new list of human drives which we presented to scientific experts in the fields of branding, emotions, and human values. This led to a framework of twenty-four drive domains (Figure 1). All of these drive domains are to a certain degree important for all human beings. They must be seen as coping strategies enabling people to pursue an integrated approach in order to a) secure the species by reproduction b) minimize feelings of inferiority and c) maximize feelings of satisfaction.

Interrelated, these strategies ultimately lead to an individually perceived degree of contentment. Drives are relatively stable, but depending on the context, the relative importance of drives can differ between individuals and within individuals over time.

It was our assumption that highly appealing brands have a drive profile based on a specific combination of drives ('drive cocktails'). Such brands often combine unexpected drives that don't seem to fit with the category or with each other. Think of Apple introducing creativity, fun, and esthetics in the computer category. Brand appeal increases if brands trigger brand-specific drives additional to category drives. Also, think of Volvo successfully combining drives as different as family care and status. Brand appeal increases if brands trigger drives from different groups of drive domains.

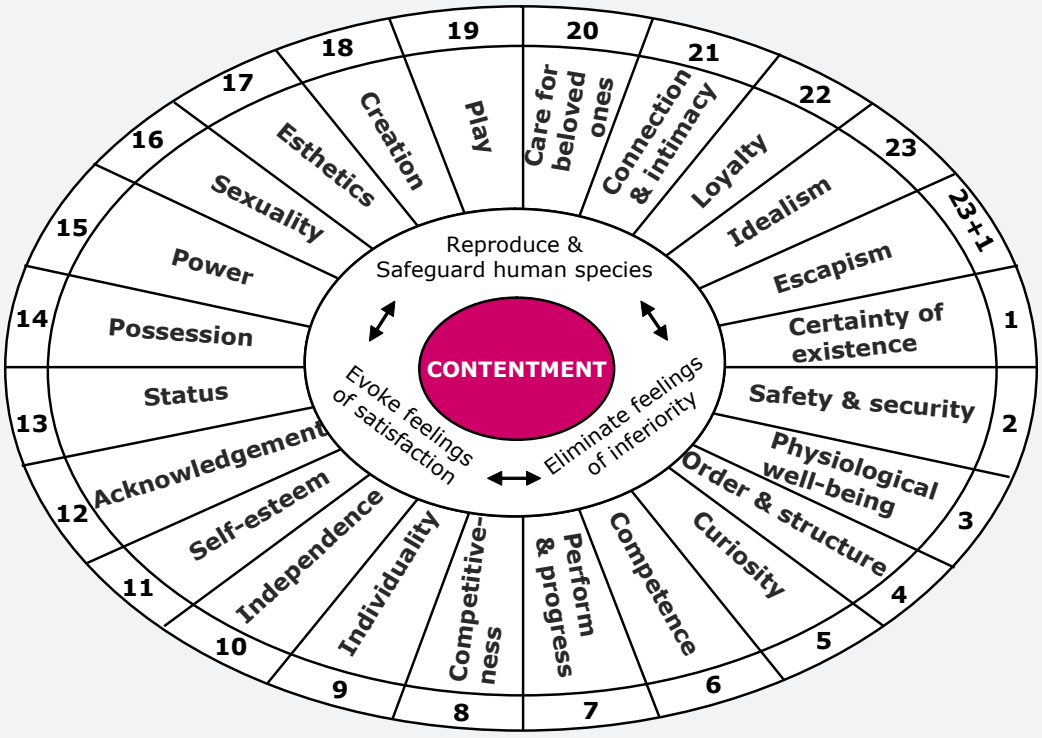


Figure 1 overview of drive domains as strategies for contentment

‘Brands are wonderful phenomena. In some way, they are able to touch you. You may even love them. Often, it is hard to explain why. Some brands just ‘feel’ better than others. They have more ‘brand appeal’.

Method

The 23plusone study consists of a literature study, development of a measuring instrument, two pilot studies, and a large scale quantitative study.

Creation & validation of a measuring instrument

From the literature study we learned that there are twenty-four drive domains, each representing a world of associations. For example, the drive domain ‘safety’ activates associations like risk-averse, protected, and careful.

To measure the drive profiles of brands and people, the framework of twenty-four drive domains had to be translated into a useable research tool. Since people are often not aware of what they find important, and find it hard to think and talk about it, we visualized the drive domains by creating twenty-four visual-verbal stimuli (Figure 2). Visual information is processed more easily, more rapidly, and less rationally.

These stimuli, each consisting of four pictures and two words, represent the world of emotions, motivations and values behind the drive domains. In order to make sure that correct associations are being triggered, the stimuli were validated extensively*. First, we asked twenty experts (people who work with text and/or visuals on a daily basis, like copywriters, architects, and designers) to judge the stimuli. They judged the visuals, then the words and finally the combination of visuals and words, by giving their associations with the stimuli and offering suggestions for improvement. Second, after improvement of the stimuli on the basis of the experts’ judgments, we asked thirty-two non-experts to freely associate on the basis of the visuals (without the words).

The associations given were highly in line with the desired associations. We also asked respondents to match the twenty-four visuals with the twenty-four word-pairs. This assignment was done almost perfectly (>90% match).

* ’With the help of market research company Ferro Explore!

After improving the stimuli and checking them once more in a smaller setting, version 1.0 of the stimuli (referred to as 'drivograms') was finalized.

After using the drivograms during the first pilot study, alterations were made to calibrate the stimuli so that there was no unrealistic imbalance between them. For example, the drivogram representing the drive domain 'power' was adjusted by replacing the words 'power' and 'dominance' with 'influence' and 'leadership' to prevent too strong associations with suppression. Version 2.0 of the drivograms (see Figure 2) was successfully used in the second pilot and the large scale study.

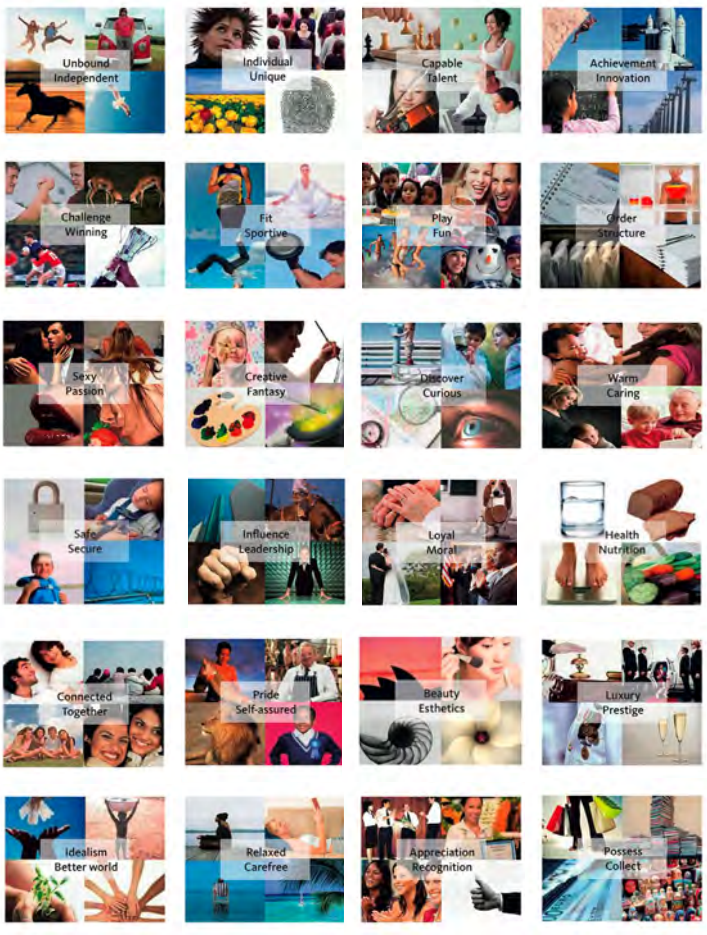


Figure 2 23plusone drivograms

Both the two pilot studies and the large scale study were quantitative online questionnaires. Respondents were asked to indicate which and how strongly drive domains were triggered by brands in various product categories. Each respondent profiled a maximum of three brands from one category, and the category itself. Respondents were also asked to what degree they found the brands appealing. Further, they were asked what they found important in life, by indicating the level of importance for each of the drive domains.

In the first pilot study, eighteen brands in two product categories (Coffee and Fashion) were investigated (n=2203). Brand, category and personal profiles were measured by scoring all twenty-four drivograms on a 5-point Likert scale. The results confirmed the usability of the measuring instrument, although some adjustments to the drivograms were required. Also, questions were raised about the best way to measure the independent variable brand appeal, and control variables 'brand awareness', 'brand expectations', and 'brand preference'.

The second pilot study (8 Telecom brands, n=956) confirmed the improvement of the drivograms. To test another measurement type for the brand profiles, the 'maxdif method' was introduced as alternative to the 5-point Likert scale. After assessing the alternatives, we chose the 5-point Likert scale to continue our research with. Although it took a bit more time, it was more consistent with the other measurements. Furthermore, data from this method were easier processed in statistical analyses. The second pilot study also helped us define the measurement of the variables brand appeal, brand awareness, brand expectations, and brand preference.

Results

Analysis showed that, indeed, brand appeal has much to do with touching the fundamental human drives. Our assumptions on combining certain drives were confirmed as well. Through factor analysis, we learned that there are five groups of drives. Combined in the 'right way', drives from different group give a boost to brand appeal. Furthermore, results showed that the influence of brand awareness, brand expectations and the 23plusone drives on brand appeal is intertwined.

The better a brand touches the fundamental human drives, the higher the brand appeal.

Statistical analysis has revealed that there is a significant correlation between the degree of declared brand appeal and the sum of means of the 23plusone drive profile. In short, the more and stronger the 23plusone drives are touched, the higher the emotional appeal of the brand.

The 23plusone drives are categorized in five groups.

Factor analyses on the 23plusone drives measured for people, categories, and brands, showed a stable solution into five groups. These are Basics, Vitality, Attraction, Self-development, and Ambition, some groups containing more drives than others (see Figure 3). Basics stands for the essential things in life, like safety, structure, care, and connection. Vitality stands for health and physical fitness. Attraction for sexuality and esthetics. Self-development and Ambition seem to be closely related conceptually. The difference lies in being intrinsically driven to progress (Self-development) versus being driven to progress for recognition from the world around you (Ambition).

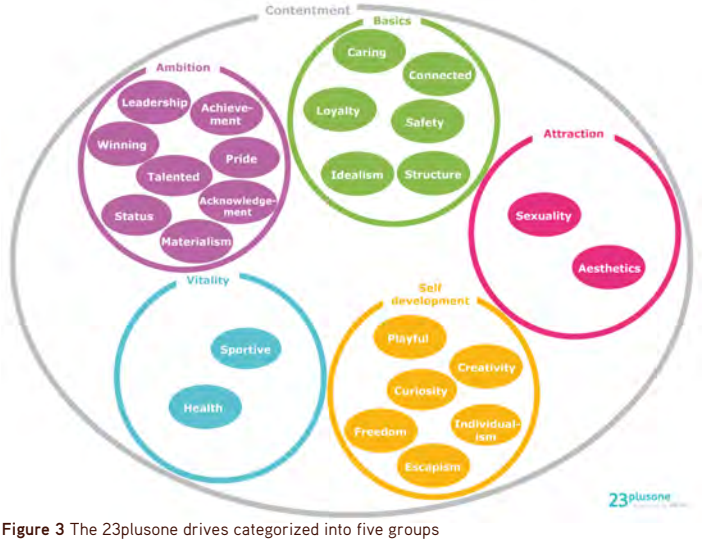


Figure 3 The 23plusone drives categorized into five groups

The better a brand simultaneously triggers drives from the five groups the higher the brand appeal.

This is a promising new insight as it confirms that brands with a 'full' drive profile, tapping into the wide scope of human drives, are more appealing than brands with a 'narrow' drive profile. For example, the Audi brand triggers drives from all groups. It is the most appealing car brand in our research (BAP score 3.22), outperforming the other car brands on half of the twenty-four drives. One of the least appealing brands in our research, Dutch insurance company Zilveren Kruis Achmea (BAP score 1.99), only triggers drives from two groups: Basics and Ambition. For an overview of the top and bottom ten of appealing brands, see figure 4. While conventional brand positioning thinking promotes clear coherent choices with focus on relevant single-minded concepts, the 23plusone research promotes positioning routes which combine various concepts and trigger multidimensional feelings. Think the genius of 'and' instead of 'either or'.

Figure 4 Top ten and bottom ten of appealing brands in the Netherlands.

Overall, drives from the groups Vitality and Attraction have the highest effect on brand appeal.

Statistical analysis to understand which of the five groups have the strongest effect revealed that Vitality and Attraction significantly drive brand appeal. At an aggregate level this is true. However, in certain specific categories this conclusion does not necessarily hold. Interestingly, from all five groups, these two have the most obvious link with reproduction of the species. Is it indeed true that humans are pre-wired to be tempted by the perspective of being potent and sexually attractive?

Brands which trigger unexpected drives, deviating from category conformity, increase in brand appeal.

Brands which succeed in outperforming drives related to their specific category combined with drives not related to the category are more appealing. They combine category generic drives with brand specific drives. According to our results, such a 'tension' between the category generic and brand specific drives is desirable. For example, the skincare category triggers drives related to protection and beauty. The Dove brand scores very well on these category generic drives, while at the same time it triggers drives related to social connection and loyalty. The unexpected combination gives a boost to Dove's brand appeal. Think again of the Audi brand, outperforming the other car brands on many drives. While Audi scores highest on the category generic drives, more than half of the 'outperformance' drives are not related to the car category (see Figure 5). And think again of Zilveren Kruis | Achmea. The brand does not outperform on any of the twenty-four drives and does not trigger any brand specific associations.
It is not unique and not notable at all (see Figure 6).

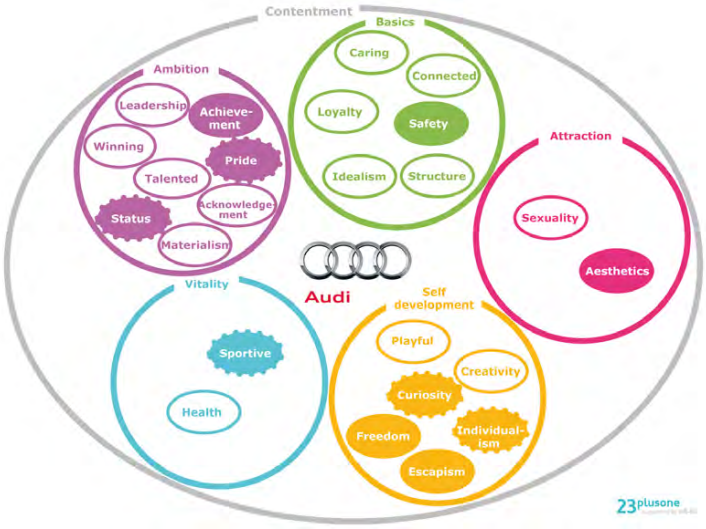


Figure 5 Audi's highly appealing 23plusone profile: tapping from the five groups with a combination of category generic and brand specific drives.

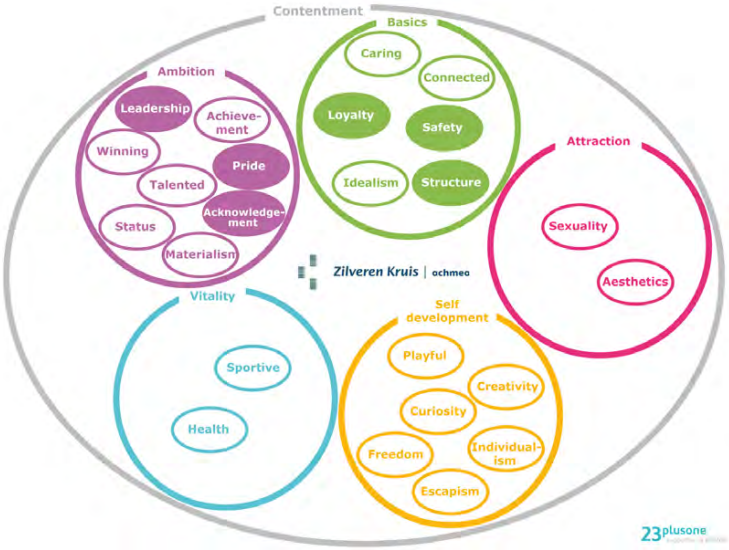


Figure 6 Zilveren Kruis | Achmea's non-appealing 23plusone profile: tapping from two of the five groups without any brand specific drive.

There are no universal mixing rules.

The most effective drive cocktail is category dependent. Although drives from the groups Vitality and Attraction have in general the highest appeal boost, we have not discovered universal mixing rules which apply across all categories. In each category, specific mixing rules seem to drive appeal. Thorough understanding and identification of the category generic drives in combination with relevant and credible brand specific drives is essential for creating highly appealing drive cocktails.

Brand awareness (degree in which the person knows the brand), Brand expectations (degree in which a person knows what to expect from a brand) and 23plusone are intertwined concepts influencing brand appeal.

Statistical analysis has indicated significant relations between three concepts related to branding (BAW, BEX and 23plusone), each influencing each other and in conjunction driving overall brand appeal (see Figure 7). The higher the Brand awareness (saliency) the higher the scores on 23plusone and Brand expectations. Brand expectations are defined as the conscious associations related to the basic functions of a brand such as quality, reliability, price-quality ratio and service-level perception. Brands with high scores on all three concepts have the highest brand appeal.

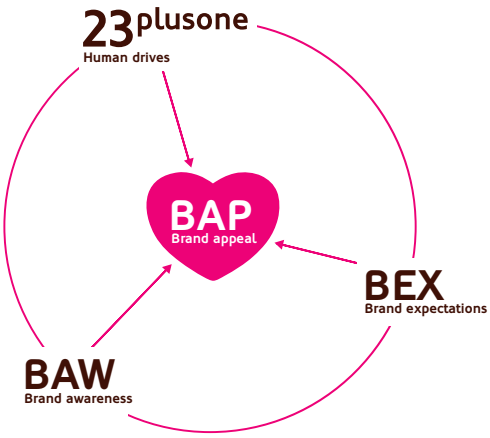


Figure 7 Brand appeal as dependent variable of Brand Awareness, Brand Expectations and 23plusone

Brand appeal is a sound marker of brand preference

There is a significant positive relation between brand appeal and brand preference. As brand preference (and in the end sales) is the objective brand builders are aiming for, this confirms our believe that brand appeal is a valuable concept for measuring and building brands. Of course, many operational factors beyond the control of branding can still be of influence (such as distribution, out-of-stocks, competitive promotions, discounts, etc.) in winning the ultimate favor of the customer.

There are few truly appealing brands which exceed their category

In our studies we discovered that most brands trigger drives related to the category they belong to. Only few brands succeed in combining category generic drives and brand specific drives. A beautiful example is Singapore Airlines, the most appealing airline. While most airlines trigger typical category drives like safety, order, and innovation, Singapore Airlines adds sexuality, individuality, esthetics, and care. In many categories however (financials, dairy, candies, et cetera), it appears that brands have not yet been able to break away from category conventions.

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