

# Getting to the essence of brand health

Core truths for the emerging “normality”

By Eric Villain



Growth  
from  
Knowledge



**T**oday's brand questions and challenges are more complex than ever. How can brands respond to what will be the new normal post-COVID and the social justice movement in ways that are both authentic and significant? At a time when anxiety and outrage have moved from daily exposure to simmering just below the surface of everyday interactions, consumers are attuned to brand missteps to a historic degree. And yet the cost of staying silent and doing nothing will likely be even higher.

When we talk to brands about their health and equity, the first question they often ask is, "Am I still relevant? Do I have momentum?" Soon after, we might hear, "Am I authentic?" Clearly today's political and social issues play into this equation – but they are part of a bigger picture. Helping

brands see that larger view and take actions today that will pay dividends for years to come taps into both the art and the science of brand measurement.

Despite all of the cultural changes around the world, the four pillars of brand building have not changed; they represent a continuum of achievements and activities that demand constant monitoring and reassessment.

- Having a **Salient brand** in the category – A brand that comes to mind easily and engagingly.
- **Brand Knowledge**– the real-world signs of a brand's identity, imagery, and personality, all of which rest in consumers' minds. An added dimension, which is playing greater importance in this new era, includes a brand authenticity and social relevance.
- **Brand Attachment** – feelings of sympathy, pride, and personal identification with a brand. All decisions are based partly in emotions, and the ability of a brand to connect with its

consumers in an emotional way is a must for long-lasting brands.

- **Brand experiences** – the ways that people interact with and come to understand brands through a variety of paid and earned experiences; these are the conduit for building brand relevance.

## Aligning life stage and brand needs

Knowing which pillars to focus on, and to what degree, is a brand manager's constant challenge. You need to understand, first, where your brand is in its lifetime arc – what life stage it has reached and, equally important, how and where is the category heading.

Breakthrough experiences with a brand lead to greater Salience, which in turn results in knowing more about a brand. If your brand, when known, is viewed as relevant, that will seed rich territory, which could lead to emotional Attachment – the

ultimate goal of any brand. And even Attachment needs to be managed and monitored carefully, to deepen and expand your brand connections.

The outcome of all of these efforts is Brand Strength – an essential commodity that manifests in two ways: preferring your brand over others (growing share) and commanding a premium (earning a price premium). Defining Brand Strength is the essence of Brand Architect – a new GfK framework that bridges the gap between consumer attitudes and actual behavior.

Brand Architect measures Brand Strength using an innovative technique to replicate how consumers choose brands in real life. Consumers are observed in multiple, realistic brand buying scenarios to understand consideration set, purchase intent and willingness to pay a premium. Having a Brand Strength measure built on financial foundations – how often someone will choose a certain brand, and how much they are willing to pay – is far superior than simple purchase intent or consideration.

## Disruptions reset the brand landscape

Another crucial factor for brand health and equity is competitive sets. Most brands exist in a context; very few are so disruptive that they create a new category – and those that do are usually joined by lookalikes in very short order. The old view that celebrates being “first out” is not necessarily a long-term advantage as the category transforms (Friendster, AOL, etc). Every entry or shift in the category set has an effect on a brand, a fact that plays out in all four pillars.

When analyzing Salience, Knowledge, and Attachment, brand teams need to take into account how their key competitors are scoring and transforming in all of those areas. By incorporating choice exercises pitting one brand against another, Brand Architect gets at the final outcome of these markers – what people will choose when it comes time to buy and why one

brand performs in a particular way among a specific consumer group.



Ultimately, you will need to reinforce people’s understanding about your brand. You cannot ever look at a brand construct without understanding the four pillars and your brand’s life stage. It takes rich expertise, salient tools, and simple listening and collaboration to keep a brand on course – making its way through a fast-changing competitive landscape and earning its place in the hearts of consumers.





---

*There is an unassuming elegance in world class brands, nothing could be simpler - yet building and maintaining them has deep and complex subtleties. That is the essence of brand steering, no matter the month, year, or decade.*

**Eric Villain** is Managing Director of Marketing Effectiveness for GfK North America.

He can be reached at [eric.villain@gfk.com](mailto:eric.villain@gfk.com)

Thank you for reading

# Getting to the essence of brand health

Core truths for the emerging “normality”  
By Eric Villain