We Live Context

A point of view



Six fingers, one moon

Why the great warring theories of brand growth are not rivals at all — and what momentum reveals the moment you stop taking sides

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Every marketer of a certain age was raised in a church. Perhaps you were brought up on brand equity, and taught that a brand is a cathedral of meaning built patiently in the customer's mind. Perhaps you came up under Byron Sharp, and learned that most of that was sentimental nonsense, and that what actually matters is being easy to buy.

Perhaps it was purpose, or loyalty, or the long and the short of it. Whatever it was, you were handed a holy book, told it was the truth, and quietly encouraged to feel a little sorry for everyone reading a different one.

And here is the awkward thing:- they cannot all be right. These theories do not merely differ in emphasis. On the big questions they flatly contradict one another. One says loyalty drives growth; another says loyalty is just a by-product of being big.

One says what a brand means is everything; another says it barely matters beside sheer availability. These are not the ramblings of fools. They are serious, careful, evidence-backed people who have spent whole careers staring at the same question and come away with opposite answers.

That ought to bother us more than it does. Because when clever people who agree on the facts keep reaching opposite conclusions, it is usually a sign that they are each looking very hard at a different feature of something bigger than any one of them has stepped back to see.

The plan

So here is the plan:- I will give you the six big theories of how brands grow, each stated as fairly as I can manage, and each in a sentence or two rather than a chapter. I will do all six a rough injustice by being that brief, and a true believer will wince; I invite them to.

Then I will show you where the six genuinely come to blows. And then — the actual point of all this — I will show you what every one of them is quietly pointing at. Fair warning: there is a single answer sitting underneath the lot of them, and I think you will spot it long before we arrive.

The six theories, fairly stated

01 Mental and physical availability — the Ehrenberg-Bass school

Brands grow chiefly by being easier to buy and easier to bring to mind — by reaching more buyers, not by deepening loyalty or sharpening difference. Rooted in Andrew Ehrenberg's empirical work and carried forward by the Ehrenberg-Bass Institute and Byron Sharp's How Brands Grow, its authority rests on regularities so consistent they are called laws — double jeopardy, the Dirichlet. The doctrine follows:- reach the whole category, build distinctive assets so you are easily recognised, be present wherever people shop. It is openly sceptical of loyalty programmes, tight targeting, differentiation and 'brand love' — which is precisely what makes it the most combative school on the map, spoiling for a fight with almost everyone below it.

02 Brand equity and meaning — Aaker, Keller and BAV

Very nearly the opposite. Brands grow by building a store of value in the mind — strong, distinctive, favourable associations that make the brand mean more and matter more. David Aaker framed equity around awareness, associations, perceived quality and loyalty. Kevin Keller's pyramid climbs from salience, up through performance and imagery to judgements and feelings, and finally to resonance, the deep bond at the top. Young & Rubicam's BrandAsset Valuator sits in the same family — differentiation, relevance, esteem, knowledge. What unites them is the conviction that growth flows from what a brand means, and how strongly.

03 The long and the short — Binet and Field

Marketing does two different jobs on two different clocks. Drawing on the IPA's databank of effectiveness cases, Les Binet and Peter Field argued for broad, emotional, fame-building brand work that compounds slowly, balanced against tight, rational activation that produces short, sharp sales spikes. The well-known finding is a roughly 60/40 split, brand-building to activation, with 'fame' — being talked about — doing a great deal of the heavy lifting. It restores emotion and the long term to the centre of the picture, which the availability lot tend to find a touch warm and fuzzy.

04 Loyalty and retention — the CLV and advocacy tradition

The classic leaky-bucket view:- it costs more to win a customer than to keep one, so the route to growth is to retain, cross-sell and turn satisfied customers into advocates. It runs from customer-lifetime-value thinking through to Fred Reichheld's loyalty work and the Net Promoter Score. And here sits the sharpest quarrel on the whole map. Ehrenberg-Bass says loyalty does not drive growth at all — it is a consequence of size, and big brands only look more loyal because they are big. Two serious traditions, flatly contradicting each other on cause and effect. When that happens, pay attention:- it usually means something is missing from the frame.

05 Purpose and meaning — the brand-ideals school

Brands grow by standing for something beyond the product — a higher purpose that forges a deeper emotional and cultural bond. Associated with Jim Stengel's work on brand ideals and the wider purpose movement, it is the most culturally prominent of the theories and the one many clients feel in their bones. It is also the most contested:- both the availability school and the effectiveness tradition have asked, reasonably, how much of the claimed growth was really purpose, and how much was simply big brands with big budgets. It belongs on the map because it is so widely held — and it sits here with the honest note that its evidence base is the most argued-over of the six.

06 Diffusion and influence — Rogers, Gladwell and the counter-current

The oldest and most intuitive model. Everett Rogers gave us the adoption curve — innovators and early adopters through to the late majority and the laggards. Malcolm Gladwell popularised the vivid version, that a special few (Mavens, Connectors and Salesmen) tip a thing over, and most of today's influencer marketing is built on it. But the network scientist Duncan Watts turned round and showed, with the data, that social spread is driven far more by the susceptibility of the many than by the specialness of the few. So even inside this one school, two camps disagree about how spread even works — top-down through special people, or bottom-up through the crowd.



A quick word about the funnel

One familiar idea deserves separate treatment, because it is not quite a theory of the same kind. The purchase funnel — awareness, consideration, preference, purchase, loyalty — was for years the dominant planning tool, and a strong school, McKinsey among them, held that you grew a brand by finding the stage where it leaked most and fixing it. The Ehrenberg-Bass work challenged both the tidy linearity of that journey and the idea that patching a single stage reliably grows anything.

And yet the funnel is far from worthless. Frozen at any one moment it describes something real:- the world genuinely is divided into people who have never heard of you, people who have heard but never tried, people considering, people buying, and people staying. It is an honest map of where everyone is standing. It simply is not a theory of what makes them move. Hold that thought, because ‘what makes them move’ turns out to be the whole game.

So who is right?

There they are, then:- six theories, each with a real and evidenced grip on how brands grow. And they are not politely disagreeing about emphasis. Loyalty: cause or symptom. Meaning: everything or nothing. The influential few or the susceptible many.

Pick any two of these and you could start a decent bar fight in Cannes. Each camp has its evidence, its advocates and its scars, and each can point to real brands that grew exactly the way its theory says they should.

Here is my answer:- **all of them**. And that only gets interesting once you can say why.

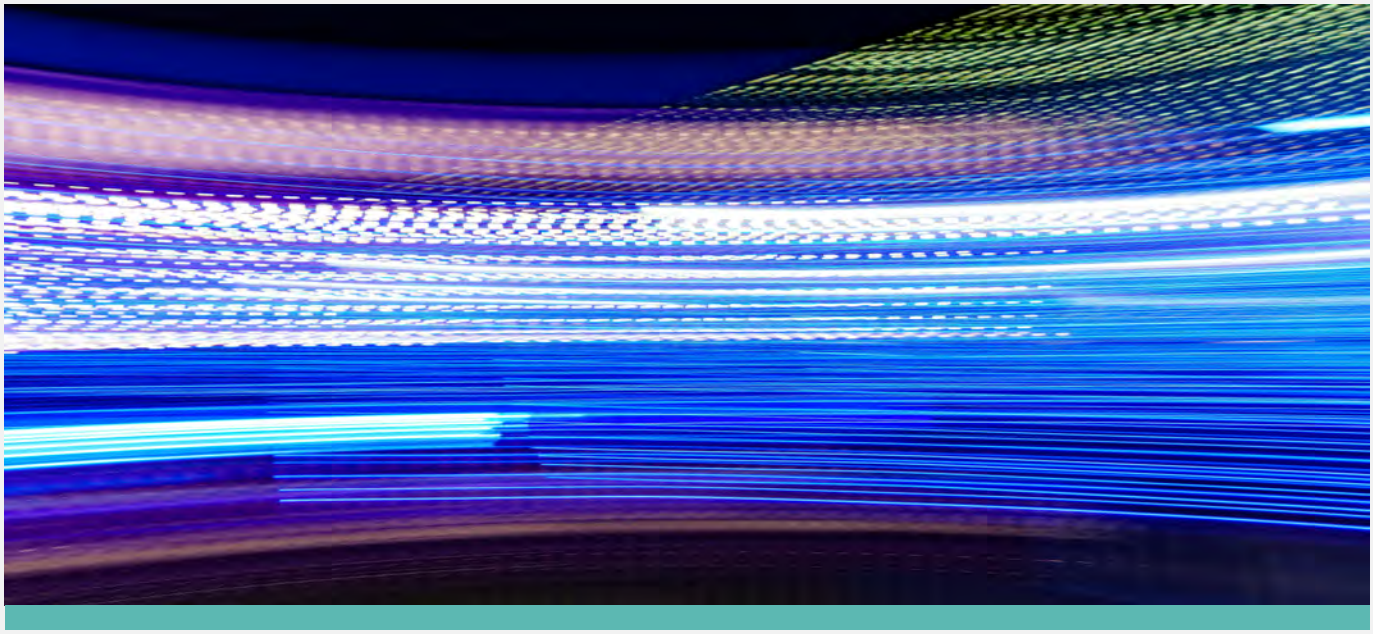
Six fingers, one moon

There is an old Zen saying that goes something like this.

> “When someone points at the moon, don’t stare at the finger.

The teaching behind it is simple:- a pointing finger is not the thing it points at, and if you spend your time studying the finger you will miss the moon entirely. Which is more or less what marketing has done for fifty years. We have stared at the fingers — arguing over which theory is the cleverest and which metric the truest — while the thing every one of them is pointing at has hung there, full and obvious, in the sky.

Momentum is the moon.



Momentum is the property a brand has when it is visibly gaining ground — when people can feel, usually without putting it into words, that it is on the rise. You know it when you see it:- the brand everyone suddenly seems to be holding, wearing, posting, recommending — the one that feels less like a choice and more like a current. And every one of the six theories is a finger raised toward it. Some are better pointers than others, and they are raised from different places, but they are all indicating the same thing:- a brand with force behind it, moving.

Now, why a moon, and not a heap of parts? Because the moon answers your fair objection from earlier — that surely each theory grabs a different piece. It does, and that is exactly right, and the moon holds it better than any pile of bits could. Keep it simple:- you can study the moon a dozen honest ways. Its surface, its phase, its distance, its speed, its mass.

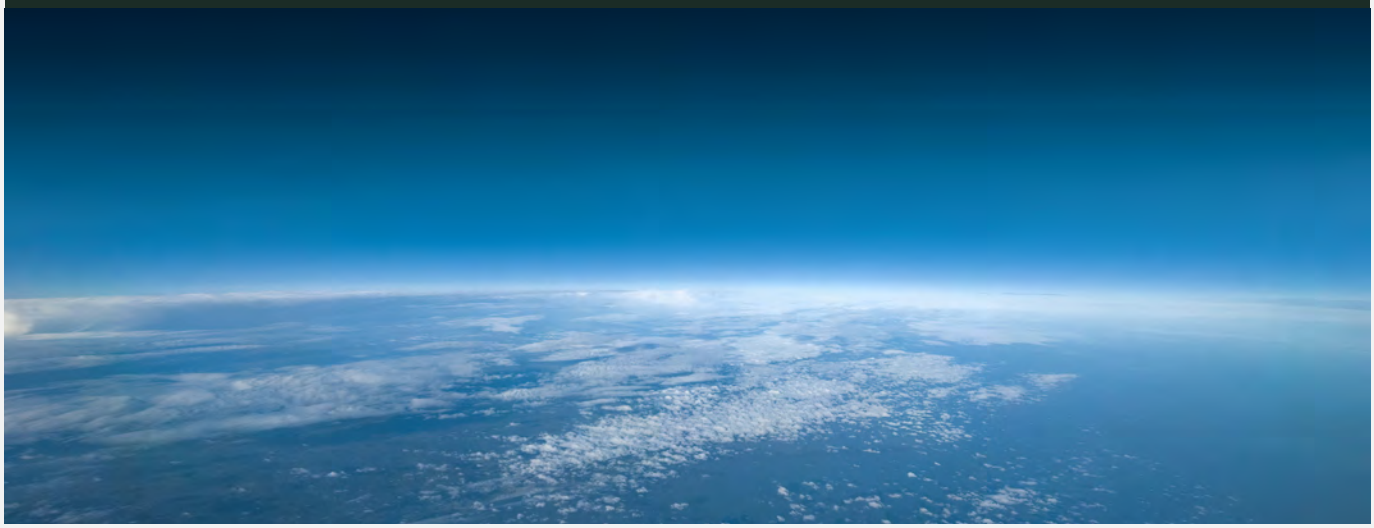
Every one of those readings is real, and useful, and tells you something true about the moon — and not one of them is the moon. The theories are precisely that:- each a genuine measurement of one property of a moving brand, and each quietly mistaking its own property for the whole thing in the sky.

In physics, momentum is mass times velocity — weight in motion.

There is a nice accident buried in the picture, too. In physics, momentum is mass times velocity — weight in motion — and the long paper leans on exactly that. Well, a moon has a mass and it has a velocity. Measure only its mass and you have a true number and half the story; measure only its speed and it is the same.

Momentum is the two of them together, in motion. So is a brand's. And a moon, of all things, is a fair emblem for the rest of the argument as well:- a body that moves others at a distance, by sheer attraction, pulling the tides without touching them.

Sort the six that way and it comes out almost tidy. Some of them are reading what gives the moon its mass and its motion — what creates momentum. Some are reading the evidence that it is already up there and moving. None, on its own, is reading the moon.



The drivers — what creates momentum

- Availability and brand equity are both about the conditions a brand builds before momentum can gather:- how far it reaches, and how much stored strength it has to draw on. Reach and reservoir.
- The long and the short is about rate — how fast momentum is being built, and, just as importantly, sustained.
- Purpose is about meaning — the reason a rising brand pulls, the thing that gives the movement a direction worth joining.

The evidence — what reveals momentum

- Loyalty and advocacy show that momentum is holding — that the force, once gathered, is staying gathered.
- Diffusion and spread show that momentum is moving — travelling through people, from the few to the many. And never mind, for a moment, whether it is the few or the many doing the pulling; both camps are describing the same tide, from opposite ends of the beach.

Six theories. One moon. Four of them reading what puts it up there, two reading the fact that it is moving.

Why this is the ‘meta’ metric

This is what people mean, or ought to mean, when they call momentum a meta metric. It is not a seventh theory shouldering into the pub to start an argument of its own. It is the thing the other six have been pointing at all along — the whole that each of them got a true and partial fix on. Awareness feeds it. So do distinctiveness, availability, relevance, reputation, advocacy and experience. None of them is momentum. Together, they are all pointing straight at it.

And once you see that, the prize is obvious. For half a century we have been inferring the moon from the fingers — reading six gauges that were never designed to be added up, and hoping the shape in our heads was roughly the shape in the sky. The alternative is to look **UP**.

To read momentum directly, in the round, and then take it apart to show where a brand’s energy is building and where it is quietly draining away:- a diagnosis the six separate theories, for all their genuine insight, were simply never built to give you. It is the difference between six clever descriptions of a finger and actually turning to look at the moon.



A last word, and a small favour

The theories were never the problem. Each is a real, hard-won reading of a moving brand, and I would not throw a single one away — I have spent enough years in enough of those churches to respect all of them.

The problem was only ever that we kept mistaking one true reading for the whole truth, and then founding a denomination around it and looking down on the neighbours.

So the next time someone tells you, with great confidence, that they have found the one true cause of growth, be generous. They are almost certainly holding something real. Just ask them, gently, whether they have thought to look up from the finger.

We Live Context are a team of marketing and research experts who help clients maximise their return on intelligence.