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Culling the brand portfolio: brand deletion outcomes and success factors

Purvi Shah,

Culling the brand portfolio: brand deletion outcomes and success factors

Purvi Shah
Foisie School of Business, Worcester Polytechnic Institute, Worcester, Massachusetts, USA

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Abstract

Purpose – It is difficult to ascertain the success factors and outcomes of deleting a brand, since these factors and outcomes differ by type of industries, firms, and brands, and vary based on contextual and organizational situations. Brand managers would benefit by having a guide explaining various factors that contribute to a successful brand deletion and providing measures of brand deletion success. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to present a list of success factors and outcomes of brand deletion, which brand managers can adapt to their specific brand deletion context and which academic researchers can use to further investigate the systemic aspects of brand deletion.

Design/methodology/approach – This article adopts a conceptual viewpoint methodology.

Findings – If brand deletion leads to improvements in business performance represented by better customer relationship management, superior competitive position, and boosts in financial performance without degrading stakeholder relationships, it can be called a success. Various factors contribute to this success such as a proactive approach to brand deletion with the involvement of top management and cross-functional teams, timely implementation of the decision, considering the strategic role and importance of the brand to be deleted in the overall brand portfolio, and managing interests of all key stakeholders affected by and influencing brand deletion.

Originality/value – Marketing practitioners can use the guidelines provided in this article and adapt it to their individual idiosyncratic contexts during brand deletion decision-making and implementation. Researchers are encouraged to further investigate the phenomenon of brand deletion strategy and focus more research attention on developing strong empirical knowledge in this important yet under-researched field.

Keywords Brand deletion outcomes, Brand deletion success factors, Brand strategy, Brand deletion, Brand portfolio management

Paper type Viewpoint

> Deletion is an uninspiring and depressing process […] seldom assumes the urgency of a crisis […] (Eckles, 1971, p. 72).

The decision to discontinue a product from a firm's portfolio is a daunting call. A firm invests significant human, financial and intellectual resources when designing, developing, and marketing a product. Generally, planning and implementing new product launches is preferred over deleting mature products. This is because launching new products convey a potential of increasing revenues and profits while deleting products is often related to distress and disappointment (Alexander, 1964; Eckles, 1971). A similar thought process applies to brands. Since brands and products are closely inter-connected, the terms "product deletion" and "brand deletion" are typically used interchangeably in practice; however, they are different (Shah *et al.*, 2016).

A product is a market offering consisting of a bundle of tangible and intangible attributes that satisfy consumer needs. A brand is a unique combination of design, sign,

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symbol, or words that identify and differentiate a product from its competition. Companies make products; products can be copied or replaced, and even become obsolete. However, brands are built by consumers, are unique, and can be timeless. Brands are rare and inimitable, intangible resources that significantly contribute to firm performance and have the potential for producing a sustainable competitive advantage in the marketplace (Barney, 2014; Grant, 1991; Vomberg *et al.*, 2015). Firms invest significant financial and non-financial resources when launching or acquiring new brands, leveraging existing brands, and introducing brand extensions and sub-brands (Kumar, 2003). However, not all brands remain strong and profitable across their life cycles. Often some brands in the brand portfolio do not contribute to the value or reduce the value of the brand portfolio. Such brands that do not achieve the purpose for which they were created and/or are not able to perform one or more of their functions are called weak brands (Shah *et al.*, 2016).

Brand deletion: a beneficial yet daunting call

It is beneficial for firms to delete weak brands from their brand portfolios. For example, companies can reduce hidden costs associated with managing weak brands, improve their bottom lines, and prevent dilution of brand portfolio value by deleting weak brands (Eckles, 1971; Kotler, 1965; Kumar, 2003; Morrin, 1999; John *et al.*, 1998). Unwieldy brand portfolios, bloated with weak brands, can constrain other valuable firm resources and elevate the complexity of internal processes in various functional areas (Putsis and Bayus, 2001; Thonemann and Brandeau, 2000). Brand deletion reduces hidden costs due to diseconomies of scale in multi-brand portfolios (Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 2000; Bayus and Putsis, 1999) and enhances profits (Kumar, 2003) as resources devoted to weak brands are redeployed to augment the value of strong brands (Varadarajan *et al.*, 2006).

In recent years, there have been numerous instances of firms deleting weak brands and channeling resources to the strong core brands in their brand portfolio. For example, in 1999, Unilever had 1,600 brands in its portfolio, 75 per cent of which contributed to less than 10 per cent of its sales revenues, with 90 per cent of profits coming from only 400 brands. After a detailed brand portfolio audit and analysis of the situation, in 2004, Unilever systematically deleted 1,200 weak brands from its brand portfolio over a period of five years by 2009 (Morgan and Rego, 2009). Similarly, Procter & Gamble (P&G) pruned over 1,000 brands from its brand portfolio over a 10-year period (Carlotti *et al.*, 2004). Brands such as Rejoice Hair Care, Thrill Dishwashing soap, and Sunshine Margarine no longer exist. P&G is still in the strategic process of deleting over 100 weak brands from its portfolio to speed up growth by focusing on the top 70-80 core strong brands that contribute 90 per cent of sales and 95 per cent of profits (Ng, 2014). In the automobile industry, Oldsmobile was discontinued in 2004 after a life of 106 years (Valdes-Dapena, 2004), Pontiac was terminated in 2010 after 84 years (Giovis, 2010), and Hummer and Saturn were also recently deleted from General Motors' portfolio.

Few firms are able to delete weak brands from their portfolios. Despite numerous financial, operational, and strategic advantages, many firms are reluctant to delete weak brands (Homburg *et al.*, 2010) because brand deletion is a stressful, controversial, and emotionally charged process. Knowing what brands to delete, and when and how to delete them, is a challenging and complex strategic choice (Varadarajan *et al.*, 2006). Several empirical studies have proposed the following multi-stage deletion process:

- identify candidates for deletion;
- analyze the selected candidates and attempt to revive them;

- evaluate the impact of deletion and make the decision to delete; and
- implement the deletion (Avlonitis and Argouslidis, 2012).

It is even more difficult to ascertain the success factors and outcomes of deleting a brand, since these factors and outcomes differ by type of industries, firms, and brands and vary based on contextual and organizational situations. For example, for organizations that have brands that are strongly influenced by legal, contractual, or regulatory controls, such as automobiles, brand deletion success depends on meeting the regulations and managing customer needs well. Issues such as informing customers before deletion, or maintaining inventory of spares for customers, among other issues, arise. However, for mass market brands operating in a highly competitive market, such as beverages, maintaining market share, and retaining customers by migrating them to another brand in the portfolio becomes the most important success factor. Brand managers would benefit by having a guide explaining various factors that contribute to a successful brand deletion and providing measures of brand deletion success. Therefore, this article presents a list of success factors and outcomes of brand deletion, which brand managers can adapt to their specific brand deletion context and which academic researchers can use to further investigate the systemic aspects of brand deletion.

Brand deletion outcomes

Brand deletion should be carried out efficiently and effectively, such that the benefits are high and costs are low. However, how should firms measure whether the brand deletion was successful or not? There are several outcomes that highlight the success of a brand deletion including no adverse customer reactions, no loss of retail shelf space and market share to competition, enhanced profits, or enhanced sales and profits of other brands. This section organizes these after-effects of brand deletion into three important outcome categories for deciding which brands to delete and how to implement the brand deletion.

Impact on customer relationships

Customers develop a cognitive and emotional bond with brands (Mikulincer and Shaver, 2007; Thomson *et al.*, 2005). They experience multifaceted feelings related to the brand, such as happiness from brand–self proximity, pride from brand–self association, and anxiety and sadness from brand–self separation (Park *et al.*, 2010). Therefore, deleting these brands can negatively influence customer satisfaction, attitude toward the brand, firm reputation, brand and firm evaluations, brand loyalty, and brand commitment (Mao *et al.*, 2009; Somosi and Kolos, 2015; Varadarajan *et al.*, 2006). Thus, brand deletion can cause a severe business disruption (Avlonitis and James, 1982). Considering consumer reactions to brand deletion while deciding to delete a brand is crucial. Positive outcomes of a successful brand deletion include deleting a brand without causing customer dissatisfaction, without negative publicity or media criticism, and at the same time migrating customers to other brands in the firm's portfolio without damaging the relationship and loyalty, and with fewer consumer confusion and complaints.

Impact on company's competitive position

Fierce competition erodes the competitive advantage of firms. Along with competitive analyses and strategic planning, adapting to changing circumstances and being able to quickly and insightfully respond to competitor moves are equally important (Debruyne *et al.*, 2002). When a firm decides to delete a brand, it needs to ensure that it did not leave market gaps for competition to capture and is capable of responding to competitor reactions by changing one or more of their marketing mix elements. Positive outcomes of a successful brand deletion involve deleting a brand without leaving market space open for competitors to seize, losing market share, losing the confidence of its salesforce, and damaging the corporate reputation and image of the firm.

Impact on the profitability, financial structure, and brand portfolio

Brands are important intangible resources that influence a firm's competitive advantage and financial performance (Madden *et al.*, 2006; Morgan and Rego, 2009). Brand portfolio strategies affect business performance (Bordley, 2003; Kumar, 2003; Park *et al.*, 2013). Strong brands enable the firm to strategically succeed and achieve superior financial performance. Some weak brands can hurt a firm's competitiveness. Deleting such weak brands, frees resources that can be reallocated to the stronger core brands in the portfolio, creating higher economies of scale in manufacturing and marketing, optimizing inventory, and enhancing profits (Kumar, 2003).

It is also important to reduce complexity and redundancy from a large brand portfolio to prevent the image dilution of strong brands. Simplifying the portfolio not only enhances efficiency in management and optimum allocation of resources but also avoids confusion in consumers' minds. Therefore, positive outcomes of a successful brand deletion include improved profitability, no harm to the image and sales of other brands in the portfolio, reduced brand redundancy in the portfolio, and resources (such as management time and costs) focused on stronger, more profitable strategic brands in the portfolio.

Brand deletion success factors

To successfully achieve the outcomes discussed above, firms should carefully consider several factors. These success factors are related to the brand itself, the brand deletion process, and the stakeholders involved in brand deletion decision-making and implementation.

Brand-related factors

A brand has a significant influence on several strategic areas of the firm. In addition to financial performance factors, firms should also consider strategic factors before deleting a brand. Management should make such a complex and important decision only after a comprehensive and systematic evaluation of various strategic factors such as the importance of the brand, its financial contribution, and also its relationship with other brands and products in the portfolio. For example, a firm could retain a weak brand with significant future extendibility and delete the brand if extending it to newer categories could hurt the brand image and thus limit its extendibility (Shah, 2015). Brand managers should also consider the portfolio size, a brand's diluting image and promise, brand redundancy, and the brand's overall fit in the portfolio, all of which could influence the portfolio's positioning in the minds of the consumers. Understanding such strategic nuances and the role played by the brand in the strategic framework of the firm is necessary for a successful brand deletion.

Process-related factors

Process-specific characteristics such as who is involved in the decision-making, process-strategy linkage, process formality and institutionalization, and how much time is devoted to the decision and its implementation, all play an important role in successful brand deletion. The "upper echelons" perspective argues for bringing the top management teams into strategic decision-making (Hambrick, 2007; Hambrick and Mason, 1984). In a strategic decision like brand deletion, top management involvement is critical (Shah, 2015). In addition to the top management team, a cross-functional team should decide which brand will be deleted and how. This is because brand deletion is a complex strategic decision which not only influences but is also influenced by various functions of a firm, such as marketing and brand management, finance, sales, manufacturing, inventory management, and logistics and distribution. Identifying, evaluating, and deleting a brand from a firm's portfolio requires cross-functional inputs, support, and coordination (Gounaris *et al.*, 2006).

Along with identifying who will be involved in the brand deletion decision-making and implementation process, firms should also systematically monitor and evaluate their brand portfolios at regular intervals, maintaining a big picture perspective of the firm's marketing and corporate strategic direction. This decision should not be made reactively under a crisis situation or as a reaction to deteriorating financial indices (Hart, 1989). Such a reactive approach to brand deletion leads to negative consequences. If the decision is a part of a proactive structured strategic approach, it will more likely facilitate a comprehensive and rational investigation of all relevant and important decision and outcome variables.

In addition to this, formality or formalization and institutionalization of the brand deletion process also affects its success. Formalization is the extent to which a firm uses standard norms, rules, and procedures to prescribe behavior and undertake decision-making (Mintzberg, 1979; Olson *et al.*, 2005). Formalization influences decision-making speed (Eisenhardt, 1989), rationality (Priem *et al.*, 1995), and efficiency (Schwenk and Shrader, 1993). Research shows that although formalization improves the brand deletion decision-making and implementation process, firms do not generally have formal procedures for brand deletion (Avlonitis, 1985; Argouslidis and Baltas, 2007; Gounaris *et al.*, 2006). Brand deletion success depends on a systematic formal process with predefined criteria. Conversely, the firm should also realize that bureaucracy, unnecessary tasks, and excessive redundant documentation could also delay the actual decision and its eventual implementation hampering the effectiveness and success of brand deletion (Gounaris *et al.*, 2006). Outcomes could be suboptimal if brand deletion is delayed. Determining an optimal speed for implementing brand deletion is also necessary for success (Argouslidis *et al.*, 2014).

Stakeholders-related factors

Brand deletion closely relates to interests of various stakeholders. Key stakeholders influenced by and influencing brand deletion include channel partners, such as suppliers, dealers, distributors and retailers; competitors; and consumers. The role played by these stakeholders in brand deletion can affect a firm's ability to maintain customer, supplier, distributor, dealer, and retailer relationships. For example, powerful retailers might refuse to stock other brands from the firm's portfolio if they believe that the brand deletion will negatively impact their business (Varadarajan *et al.*, 2006). This refusal means losing valuable retail shelf space to competitors who might quickly react to the brand deletion and seek to capture the gap in the market. Suppliers could demand better terms or higher price for supplying raw materials for other existing brands (Harrison *et al.*, 2010). If customers are brand loyal and emotionally attached to the brand, deleting the brand could lead to detrimental effects on customer relationships. In an era of customer-to-customer communications using social media, customer opposition and resistance can spread negative word-of-mouth for the firm.

Successful brand deletion requires careful management of stakeholder interests. The complexity of the brand deletion strategy and the impact it has on several stakeholders requires their involvement and explicit consideration of their interests in the decision-making and implementation process. A firm should understand the impact of brand deletion on these stakeholders and the role these stakeholders play in implementing the brand deletion decision. Once stakeholder interests and relationships are systematically evaluated, the firm's next step is to expeditiously inform all important stakeholders about the decision and the rationale behind the brand deletion. The firm should be prepared to address any concerns or issues they might have about the brand deletion. In this way, a firm does not alienate its key stakeholders, ensures that the decision is well-accepted, reduces opposition or tension caused by the deletion decision, and maintains trustworthy relationships with all stakeholders.

In summary, if brand deletion leads to improvements in business performance represented by better customer relationship management, superior competitive position, and boosts in financial performance without degrading stakeholder relationships, it can be called a success. Various factors contribute to this success such as a proactive approach to brand deletion with the involvement of top management and cross-functional teams, timely implementation of the decision, considering the strategic role and importance of the brand to be deleted in the overall brand portfolio, and managing interests of all key stakeholders affected by and influencing brand deletion. Marketing practitioners can use the guidelines provided in this article and adapt it to their individual idiosyncratic contexts during brand deletion decision-making and implementation.

To this end, there is a need to further investigate brand deletion strategy before we assert that we completely understand the phenomenon of brand deletion. Researchers are encouraged to further investigate the phenomenon of brand deletion strategy and focus more research attention on developing strong empirical knowledge in this important yet under-researched field by investigating interesting questions such as:

RQ1. How do consumers react to brand deletion and how does this reaction influence brand deletion outcomes?

RQ2. How does each of the success factors affect outcomes of brand deletion?

RQ3. How would success factors and outcomes vary by contextual and organizational factors?

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About the author

Dr Purvi Shah is an assistant professor of Marketing at the Foisie Business School in Worcester Polytechnic Institute, MA, USA. Her main research interests are strategic brand management, pre-purchase information search, and management education. Her research has been published in *Journal of Brand Management*, *Journal of Consumer Affairs*, *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, and *Journal of Brand Strategy*. Purvi Shah can be contacted at: pshah@wpi.edu