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TRANSFORMING A COMMODITY INTO A PREMIUM BRAND: A CONCEPTUAL MODEL FOR BRANDING THROUGH MARTECH AND PERSONALIZATION

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Abstract

In traditional marketing, commodities—products with little differentiation—are viewed as challenging to brand (Keller, 2003). However, Avocados From Mexico (AFM) defied this logic by building a leading brand for fresh produce using marketing technology (MarTech), CRM strategies, and AI-enabled personalization (Wedel & Kannan, 2016).

This conceptual paper develops a framework to explain how commodity products can achieve brand equity through digital transformation. It presents a model supported by empirical evidence from AFM's campaigns (2014–2023), demonstrating how MarTech, CRM, and personalization strategies can influence brand awareness, preference, and engagement. The model includes moderating effects of integrated marketing communication (IMC) orchestration and category growth. This study contributes to branding theory by reframing how non-differentiated products can develop consumer-centric value through integrated, data-driven communication.

Keywords: Branding, Consumer Engagement, MarTech, Personalization, Digital Marketing.

1. Introduction

Branding commodities presents a paradox in marketing. Traditionally, commodities like fresh produce, grains, and raw materials are viewed as undifferentiated goods competing mainly on price (Shapiro, 2002). However, Avocados From Mexico (AFM) disrupted this paradigm by demonstrating that commodities can build strong brands through MarTech adoption, CRM management, and personalized communication strategies.

The proliferation of AI technologies has expanded marketers' capabilities to personalize messages, optimize targeting, and strengthen brand equity, even in categories with minimal inherent product differentiation (Kannan & Li, 2017).

This paper proposes a conceptual framework that explains how marketing technology and data-driven personalization transform branding in commodity sectors. Grounded in the transformative theme of marketing's role in an AI-driven world, the framework addresses how brands can strategically orchestrate MarTech, CRM, and IMC to drive brand outcomes.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Branding in Commodities

Brand equity represents the set of assets linked to a brand's name and symbol that add value to a product or service (Aaker, 1996).

In commodity markets, where intrinsic product differences are minimal, branding relies on building emotional connections, associative meanings, and superior customer experiences rather than physical product features (Keller, 2003).

Avocados From Mexico adopted a branding strategy grounded in emotional storytelling and category education, aiming to transform a commodity into a lifestyle-driven choice. This is consistent with Keller's (1993) findings, who proposes that strong brands are built by establishing deep customer-brand relationships and meaningful brand imagery.

2.2 MarTech and CRM Infrastructure

Marketing Technology (MarTech) platforms—such as Customer Data Platforms (CDPs), CRM systems, and AI personalization engines—enable brands to gather consumer data, segment audiences, and deliver targeted content at scale (Wedel & Kannan, 2016).

Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems serve as repositories of behavioral, transactional, and demographic data, supporting relationship marketing strategies (Peppers & Rogers, 1997).

In the case of AFM, MarTech adoption allowed for the capture of millions of first-party data points, fueling personalized messaging campaigns that increased retailer and consumer engagement and preference.

2.3 Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) and Personalization

Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) refers to the strategic coordination of all promotional messages across channels to present a unified message to the consumer (Percy, 2014).

IMC ensures that brand messaging across digital, social, retail, and experiential channels is consistent and reinforcing, thus strengthening brand meaning and consumer recall (Kliatchko, 2008).

Personalization further enhances the impact of IMC by delivering content that is not only consistent but also relevant to the individual's needs, preferences, and behaviors (Arora et al., 2008). In AI-driven environments, brands use dynamic content engines and behavioral analytics to personalize offers, thereby increasing message effectiveness and engagement rates (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016)

In the AFM case, consistent brand messaging across TV advertising, social media, and CRM campaigns—while also offering tailored recipes, promotions, and health information—illustrated the synergistic effects of IMC and personalization.

2.4 Customer Engagement and Brand Outcomes

Customer engagement encompasses the behaviors by which consumers interact with brands beyond transactions, such as participating in brand communities, sharing content, and advocating for the brand (Brodie et al., 2011).

Engagement builds emotional bonds and strengthens the cognitive, affective, and behavioral loyalty pathways that sustain brand equity (Van Doorn et al., 2010).

Research shows that higher engagement correlates with improved brand preference, willingness to pay premiums, and advocacy behaviors (Hollebeek et al., 2014).

In commodity categories, where rational product differences are minimal, building strong engagement through emotional and experiential branding becomes critical.

3. Conceptual Framework

The proposed framework (see Figure 1) theorizes that:

- MarTech adoption enables CRM infrastructure, facilitating content personalization.
- Personalized brand communication positively affects brand equity (awareness, preference).
- Brand equity enhances customer engagement, which in turn drives sales performance.
- IMC orchestration strengthens the personalization–brand equity link.
- Category growth trends moderate the brand equity–engagement relationship.

This framework positions data-driven marketing capabilities and integrated communication as strategic levers for branding in commodity markets.

4. Hypotheses Development

Based on the theoretical foundations discussed above, we propose the forllowing hypoteses:

H1. MarTech adoption positively influences the implementation of personalized brand communication in commodity categories.

Brands that invest in MarTech platforms can leverage data to segment audiences and deliver tailored content, enhancing relevance and engagement (Wedel & Kannan, 2016).

H2. CRM infrastructure mediates the relationship between MarTech adoption and content personalization.

CRM systems aggregate customer data from multiple sources, enabling effective personalization strategies (Peppers & Rogers, 1997). Without a robust CRM foundation, the personalization enabled by MarTech would be fragmented and less impactful.

H3. Personalized brand communication positively affects brand equity in commodity markets.

Personalization enhances customer perceptions of brand relevance, emotional connection, and perceived quality, key drivers of brand equity (Keller, 2003).

H4. IMC orchestration positively moderates the relationship between personalized brand communication and brand equity.

When personalization is integrated within a coherent multi-channel strategy, it amplifies its effects on consumer perceptions and brand loyalty (Percy, 2014; Kliatchko, 2008).

H5. Category growth trends positively moderate the relationship between brand equity and customer engagement.

In expanding categories, consumers are more receptive to brand-building efforts, making brand equity a stronger predictor of behavioral engagement (Aaker, 1996).

H6. Customer engagement mediates the relationship between brand equity and sales performance in commodity categories.
Engaged customers not only prefer the brand but also advocate for it, increasing organic growth and purchase frequency (Brodie et al., 2011; Van Doorn et al., 2010).

5. Empirical Evidence from the Case of Avocados From Mexico

Avocados From Mexico (AFM) provides empirical support for the proposed model.

5.1 MarTech and CRM Deployment

Starting in 2014, AFM adopted Salesforce Marketing Cloud and other MarTech tools to build its first-party data ecosystem. By capturing purchase behavior, event participation, and digital interactions, AFM created over 5 million CRM profiles by 2022 (Rucker, D. D., & Luque, L., 2024). This data backbone enabled the delivery of segmented and dynamic content across owned and paid channels.

5.2 Personalization and IMC Execution

AFM leveraged its CRM and MarTech infrastructure to deliver highly personalized campaigns. An emblematic case was the "Homemade Cinco" campaign in 2021, where the brand offered customized recipes and digital experiences tailored to different consumer segments during Cinco de Mayo celebrations.
This initiative resulted in more than 5.6 billion impressions, significant social media engagement, and high click-through rates on personalized emails (Rucker, D. D., & Luque, L., 2024). Moreover, AFM ensured that personalized digital experiences were seamlessly integrated with broader mass media strategies.
For instance, during Super Bowl campaigns from 2015 to 2020, AFM combined national television advertising with personalized CRM-driven follow-ups, reinforcing the brand message across touchpoints (Fast Company Staff, 2021). This orchestration is consistent with IMC theory, which posits that consistency and reinforcement across channels maximize communication effectiveness (Percy, 2014).

5.3 Branding Outcomes

The integration of MarTech, CRM, and IMC strategies resulted in substantial brand-building achievements for AFM:

- **Brand Awareness:** Unaided awareness of the AFM brand increased from 6% in 2014 to 25% by 2021 (Rucker, D. D., & Luque, L., 2024).
- **Brand Preference:** Brand preference rose from 20% to over 60% during the same period, showing growing emotional and cognitive attachment to the brand.
- **Engagement Metrics:** AFM's online community surpassed 4 million members, with CRM open rates and engagement metrics outperforming industry benchmarks (Rucker, D. D., & Luque, L., 2024).
- **Sales Impact:** Avocado imports to the U.S. grew from 1.7 billion pounds in 2014 to over 2.4 billion pounds by 2022, with AFM capturing a majority share of category growth.

These outcomes align with the conceptual framework proposed, validating the central role of technology-enabled personalization and IMC orchestration in building brand equity and driving customer engagement in a commodity category.

6. Managerial Implications

The success of Avocados From Mexico (AFM) in transforming a commodity into a preferred brand offers several important lessons for managers operating in low-differentiation categories:

6.1 Investment in MarTech and CRM is Crucial

Even in commodity markets, brand-building today requires sophisticated technological infrastructure. Managers must prioritize investments in MarTech stacks—such as customer data platforms (CDPs), CRM systems, and marketing automation tools—that enable personalization at scale (Wedel & Kannan, 2016). Without a data-driven foundation, brands are unable to deliver the relevance and engagement necessary to shift consumer perceptions.

6.2 Personalization Enhances Brand Relevance

Personalized brand communication helps bridge the gap between functional parity and emotional differentiation. By offering tailored content based on preferences, behaviors, and context, brands can create emotional resonance and perceived value where physical product differences are minimal (Arora et al., 2008; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

6.3 IMC Orchestration Multiplies Impact

Managers must not only invest in personalization, but also ensure that messages are harmonized across all touchpoints. An isolated personalized message loses strength if it contradicts broader brand communications. Integrated marketing communication (IMC) ensures that personalized content reinforces a consistent brand story, amplifying its impact (Percy, 2014; Kliatchko, 2008).

6.4 Engagement Drives Measurable Outcomes

Traditional brand health metrics like awareness and preference are still important, but active customer engagement increasingly serves as the bridge between brand perceptions and actual sales behavior (Brodie et al., 2011; Hollebeek et al., 2014). Managers should design programs that encourage customer participation, advocacy, and content sharing to fully realize the benefits of their brand equity investments.

7. Theoretical Contributions

This study offers several contributions to the marketing and branding literature, particularly within the context of commodity markets and technology-enabled strategies:

7.1 Extending Brand Equity Theory to Commodities

Traditional conceptualizations of brand equity have often emphasized categories with higher inherent differentiation (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 2003). This research extends brand equity theory to the commodity sector, showing that perceived differentiation can be constructed not through product features but through experiences, personalization, and emotional branding.

7.2 Integrating MarTech and CRM into Branding Models

While prior branding models have largely emphasized psychological processes (e.g., awareness, associations, loyalty), this study introduces technological enablers—MarTech and CRM systems—as fundamental infrastructural pillars for brand building (Wedel & Kannan, 2016). The model highlights how data-driven personalization and CRM-based segmentation operationalize brand-building strategies at scale.

7.3 Positioning IMC as a Moderator of Personalization Effectiveness

This research refines the role of Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC), proposing that IMC orchestration acts as a moderator enhancing the impact of personalized communications on brand outcomes (Percy, 2014). Rather than viewing IMC merely as consistency maintenance, this study positions IMC as a strategic amplifier in technology-driven branding ecosystems.

7.4 Highlighting Customer Engagement as a Mediating Variable

Customer engagement is theorized not simply as a consequence of brand equity but as a key mediator between brand perceptions and tangible business outcomes like repeat purchases, advocacy, and category growth (Brodie et al., 2011; Van Doorn et al., 2010). This insight is particularly critical for brands operating in mature, low-differentiation categories where conventional loyalty programs may have diminishing returns.

8. Future Research Directions

This conceptual framework opens several avenues for future academic inquiry:

8.1 Empirical Validation Across Commodity Categories

Future research should empirically test the proposed model across other commodity sectors such as dairy, coffee, meat, and grains. Comparative studies can help generalize or refine the relationships identified in this study and assess the contextual boundaries of technology-enabled brand building (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 2003).

8.2 Longitudinal Studies on Technology-Driven Brand Building

Given the evolving nature of MarTech and CRM capabilities, longitudinal studies could investigate how the maturity of technology adoption influences the development of brand equity and customer engagement over time (Wedel & Kannan, 2016).

8.3 AI and Real-Time Personalization Dynamics

Artificial Intelligence (AI) offers brands the ability to deliver dynamic, real-time personalized content. Future studies should explore how real-time personalization strategies affect consumer perceptions of privacy, intrusiveness, and trust, and ultimately brand outcomes (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

8.4 Moderating Effects of Cultural and Regulatory Contexts

Cultural differences in attitudes toward personalization and varying data privacy regulations (e.g., GDPR in Europe) may moderate the effectiveness of MarTech and CRM strategies. Research could explore cross-national differences in branding outcomes in commodities using data-driven marketing strategies.

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Figure 1. Conceptual model diagram