Buddy-buddy with the brand

Measure and control brand relationships online with BrandGraph

In order to successfully position a brand in the market, it is essential to have a precise understanding of the relationship between people and the brand. Coincidentally, relationships with brands follow similar patterns as interpersonal relationships. Dr. Ludger Rolfes and Fabian Bethge from the market research institute Produkt + Markt show how BrandGraph, an approach to constellation work borrowed from psychotherapy, can be used to gather completely new insights.

Current market research methods often hit a wall when it comes to exploring brand relationships: Even though there are new approaches available in qualitative market research, multi-country comparisons, target group comparisons or before-and-after comparisons can only be accomplished with great effort. Quantitative market research, on the other hand, is confronted with the fact that participants hardly ever really engage in a survey that asks to provide reflected information on such a complex topic as relationships. Fournier's Brand Relationship Quality (BRQ) Scale can be used to measure the quality of the brand relationship. However, the scale does not provide any information about the role that consumers attribute to the brand in the brand relationship. Analyses of social networks may reveal the "followers" of a brand and whom else these people follow; nevertheless, the analysis does not consider the multidimensionality of relationships either.

Relationships can reach deep into one's identity; after all, we often define ourselves primarily through relationships – including brand relationships. In order to measure brand relationships implicitly, we developed a method that allows respondents to express the full range of different relationships without having to describe those relationships extensively. Based on psychotherapeutic constellation work, structural constellations have provided the key inspiration to an intuitive language that can be used to describe relationships. In qualitative market research, structural constellations are already utilised to analyse brand relationships.

As part of an online survey, respondents are asked to create a structural constellation between themselves and various brand names on the screen. This allows them to individually position themselves and brands in relation to each other from very unique perspectives. Additionally, all elements are assigned a viewing direction. The spatial position in the room and the viewing direction are chosen as two quantifiable dimensions in order to facilitate implicit measurement of brand relationships. This task usually takes three minutes on average. The visualisation of the relationships established by the respondents established allows them to emotionally experience said relationships. Consequently, memories of related experiences are triggered within the respondents and hence are easier to recall.

Combined with a high number of cases, this subjectivity provides vital advantages: Different types of relationships can be identified and assigned to the respondents. The method may also serve as an icebreaker to put respondents into the appropriate mind-set, which makes it easier for him or her to answer relationship questions.

Eight relationship roles provide information

The additional query of the viewing directions as well as the resulting potential combinations of viewing direction and distance reveal a large number of key figures.

In a validation study, several of these indicators were compared with dimensions of Fournier's BRQ scale: Interdependence, Love/Commitment, Partner Quality, Self-Connection, and Intimacy. The results illustrate that all five BRQ dimensions show a strong positive correlation between all key figures of the constellations and the corresponding brand usage. However, the actual key figures only show little correlation with each other. Therefore it is reasonable to assume that our online constellations measure dimensions that also contain information about the relationship roles, in addition to the relationship quality captured in the BRQ scale.

As answers to open questions, the participants described and explained the relationships they had established with the brands. Afterwards they were coded. A correlation analysis then found the following dimensions describing the characteristics of the brand in the relationship: interesting, useful, understanding, binding, engaging, cooperative, neutral, and attractive.

Based on existing typologies of brand relationships and typologies in motivational psychology, eight relationship roles can be defined, which are each assigned to an ideal-typical combination of the aforementioned characteristics. Four symmetrical and four asymmetrical relationships were classified. The symmetrical relationships are called "best friendship", "nuanced friendship", "consolation/avoidance relationship" and "involuntary community". The asymmetrical relationships are called "brand as provider", "brand as aspirant", "brand as boss", and "brand as subordinate". For example, the role of "nuanced friendship" is defined as a relationship characterised as highly interesting, useful, and understanding, but also little engaging.

In a test study, we were able to show that the eight defined relationship roles can be divided into subgroups in terms of usage preference and relationship quality. Thus, there are certain brand roles that are generally successful.

Useful when launching an additional brand

Essentially, the procedure is suitable for all questions where a comparison of brand relationships is of interest with regard to several countries, points in time or target groups. The approach is particularly useful for the management of a brand portfolio or the launch of an additional own brand. On the one hand, a concept test allows one to analyse ahead of time where the new brand should be positioned in the overall market, and how it would affect each individual relationship. On the other hand, the actual changes can be analysed with a measurement before and after market launch.

Examining the relationship between people and brands

Another strength of the approach is the possibility of fast and action-relevant segmentation. The constellations allow respondents to be assigned to specific relationship styles, regardless of the brands they have positioned in the constellation. Some respondents focus their interest on one brand, others prefer an overview, some consider mutual understanding as important, others follow a rather benefit-oriented approach.

In many areas, this method is ground breaking; by simple means it can implicitly ascertain many dimensions of relationships between people and brands. The better the understanding of these dimensions is, the more relevant the market simulation becomes. Based on the forces acting among the elements in the constellations, driver analyses can be used to calculate which market players would need to change in which relationship dimensions in order to optimise a certain target dimension, such as the degree of understanding in the relationship or the attractiveness for the consumer. The better the relation between relationship dimensions and traditional key performance indicators can be quantified the more immediate one can derive recommendations for the management of brand relationships.
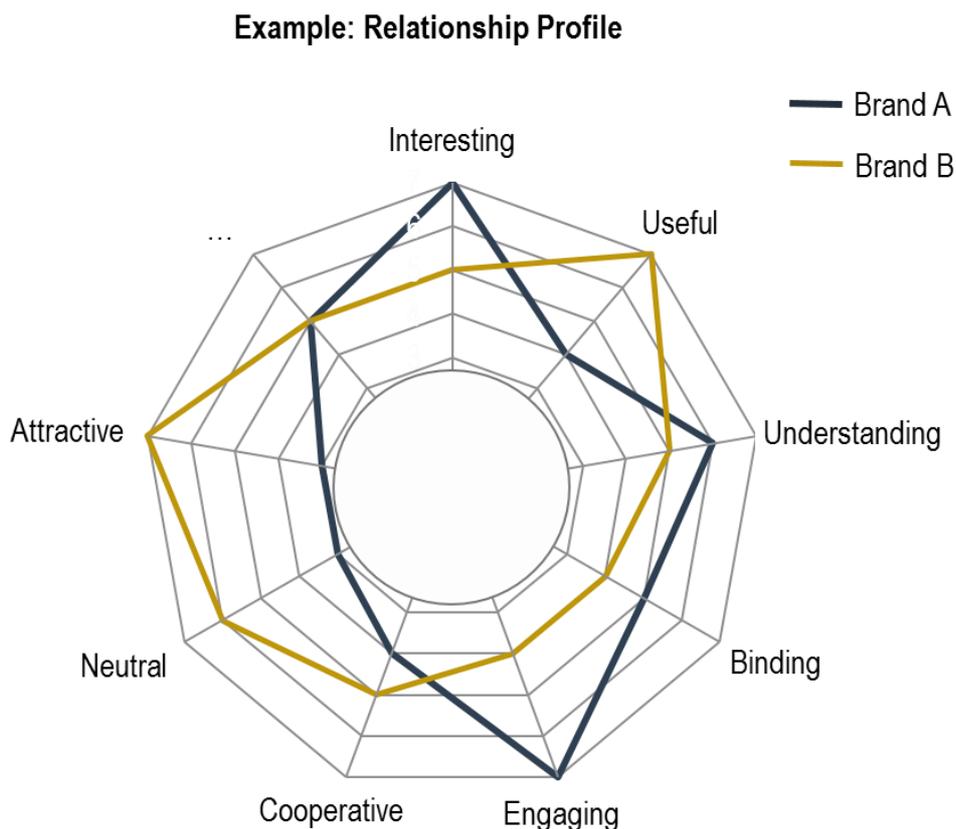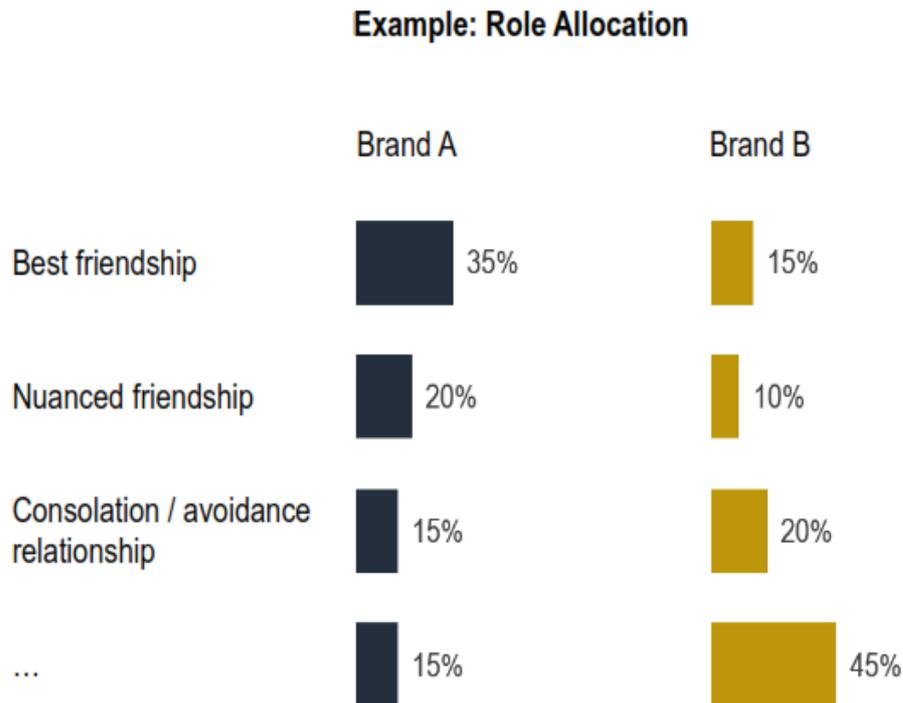
Figure 1:

Example: Relationship Profile

Figure 2:

Example: Role Allocation

	Brand A	Brand B
Best friendship	35%	15%
Nuanced friendship	20%	10%
Consolation / avoidance relationship	15%	20%
...	15%	45%

About the authors

Dr. Ludger Rolfes has been with Produkt + Markt since 2007. As Division Director for Animal Health & Nutrition Research, he looks after international customers from the veterinary pharmaceutics and pet food industry.

lrolfes@produktundmarkt.de

Fabian Bethge has been a Research Manager for Animal Health Research at Produkt + Markt since 2013. Prior to joining P+M, he studied Media and Communication Research with a focus on research methods and innovation communication.

fbethge@produktundmarkt.de

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