

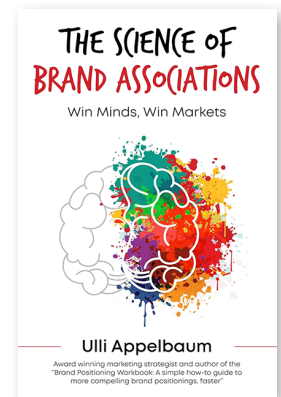


Executive Book Summaries[®]

The Science of Brand Associations

Win Minds, Win Markets

by **Ulli Appelbaum**



Contents

What Is a Brand?

Page 2

The Many Different Meanings of Brands

Page 3

10 Reasons Strong Brand Association Networks Matter

Page 4

Brand Assets—Brand Associations with Superpowers

Page 5

9 Strategies to Create Strong Brand Association Networks

Page 6

14 Proven Principles of Brand Growth

Page 7

THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Consumers are constantly surrounded by brands—at home, at work, and in everyday life. Over time, these brands accumulate associations that shape how consumers feel, what they remember, and ultimately what they choose. The strength, speed, and nature of these associations play a decisive role in brand growth. Understanding how these associations form and how they can be shaped deliberately is therefore central to building successful brands.

In *The Science of Brand Associations: Win Minds, Win Markets*, Ulli Appelbaum explains how brands are formed in the minds of consumers and why Brand Association Networks—the interconnected memories and meanings linked to a brand—are central to effective brand building. Drawing on insights from neuroscience, cognitive psychology, and marketing research, the book shows how associations are created, strengthened, and retrieved, and why some brands grow faster and command greater preference than others.

It also examines the different meanings brands can hold, the role of distinctive brand assets, and the principles that guide long-term growth. In addition, it outlines common reasons brands fail, strategies for overcoming negative associations, and practical approaches to researching and measuring brand associations over time. Together, these insights provide a clear framework for building, evaluating, and strengthening brands through associations.

IN THIS EXECUTIVE BOOK SUMMARY

- Explore how the human brain forms, stores, and retrieves brand associations, and why memory, emotion, and repetition shape consumer choice over time
- Demonstrate why strong Brand Association Networks drive growth and preference
- Outline how brands are built and differentiated through associations, from defining core meanings to reinforcing them consistently across touchpoints
- Identify common reasons brands fail—and how to avoid them

Introduction

Amazon has no books with the phrase *brand associations* listed in the title. This is true despite the fact that they are the single most important concept in marketing and successful brand management. Understanding how brands are formed in the minds of consumers—and how to create and nurture strong, rich association networks around an offering, whether a product, service, or idea—forms the foundation of effective marketing and brand building.

A science-based, data-driven understanding of how brands are defined, formed, nurtured, and grown enables more focused and effective brand strategies. With greater clarity around brand associations, marketers can evaluate initiatives more rigorously and manage brand-building efforts with greater confidence and precision.

CHAPTER 1

What Is a Brand?

A brand is a network of associations consumers develop over time in their minds about a specific offering—associations that shape how they feel about and act toward that brand. These associations, more specifically called *Brand Association Networks*, are basically memories that are connected to each other, forming a network, and linked to a specific offering.

Brand Association Networks represent the foundation of a brand's equity. They reflect how brands are formed in the brain and clarify the role of brand stewards: to deliberately create, nurture, and manage the associations that influence how a brand is perceived, remembered, and chosen.

Understanding how Brand Associations Networks, or memory structures, are formed, strengthened, and retrieved in the mind of consumers is therefore essential knowledge for building strong, successful brands and a requirement for every brand steward.

Despite the importance of the associations that exist in consumers' brains regarding products, few marketers can name the top associations consumers connect with their brand, and even fewer can identify the associations that are truly driving their business.

It is usually the marketing directors of the most successful brands who have a clear sense of the two or three core associations their brand should stand for. Additionally, within many organizations, there is little consensus among stakeholders on what those associations should be. Clarity of intent is essential to a brand's success.

CHAPTER 2

How Brands Are Formed in the Brains of Consumers

As Walter Landor said, “products are made in factories, but brands are created in the mind.” Two scientific concepts are particularly relevant for brand associations. These are the Associative Network Theory and the learning and understanding derived from neuroscience. While these two approaches come at the brain from different angles, the principles and mechanisms of how brands are created are very similar and consistent.

The Associative Network Theory

Cognitive Psychology has developed the framework referred to as the Associative Network of Learning. At the center of the Associative Network Theory is the idea that our memory resembles a huge network in which ideas, images, emotions, concepts, and experiences are linked together. The theory describes the memory as a structured web of interconnected concepts made out of nodes and links between those nodes. These nodes are the fundamental units of information within the network, representing specific pieces of knowledge.

Every experience and emotion consumers associate with a specific brand is represented by a node. Links or associations are the connections that exist between three nodes and signify the relationship between different pieces of information. The more frequently two concepts or nodes are encountered together or are associated with each other, the stronger the link between these nodes becomes.

The strength of these associations plays a crucial role in the process of information retrieval. Stronger links between nodes increase the likelihood that activating one node will lead to the activation of related nodes. A node can be activated by a stimulus like a brand logo, by an internal need such as hunger, or even by scents. When a node is activated, it sets off a chain reaction of activation, like a firework, across the connected nodes in the network.

When a brand node is activated by the exposure to a brand name or logo, brand stewards want the subsequent spread of activation to lead to the retrieval of favorable and intended brand associations. This helps create brand preferences and prompts consumers at the time of purchase. Cognitive psychology and the Associative Network Theory can be described as the data management system in the brain, i.e. the cognitive processes of how brand memories, knowledge, and emotions are stored, organized, and retrieved in the brain.

Brands with richer and more positive Brand Association Networks tend to have larger market shares than their competitors.

”

The Neuroscience of Brands

Neuroscience views memories not as stored in a single location, but rather as a dynamic system that connects different memory systems based on the type of memories encoded and stored. This pattern of connectivity is composed of groups of engrams and synapses rather than nodes and links.

The engram is also known as a memory trace and is the physical representation of a memory in the brain. When the brain encounters new pieces of information or experience, the engram represents the physical changes that the brain went through to store that piece of information. The engrams and the neurons they are forming can involve different brain regions and connections between them.

The connection between these neurons contained in the engrams is called synapses. These synapses become stronger if the two neurons are active at the same time, and stronger and more frequently activated synapses are analogous to the stronger “links” in the Associative Network Theory. When a stimulus or thought activates a particular neural node, the electrical and chemical signals propagate along the synaptic connection to other related nodes, mirroring the cognitive process described in the Associative Network Theory.

Within both frameworks, brands are the sum of all the associations (nodes or neuron networks), positive or negative, connected to a specific offering. If consumers get exposed to a new piece of information about the brand or have a new experience with the brand, this information is integrated into the existing network. The stronger individual associations are and the stronger the link between the associations, the faster they will be retrieved and activated when the consumer is exposed to an association within that network.

CHAPTER 3

The Many Different Meanings of Brands

Brand Association Networks are mental constructs that often carry meaning that extends far beyond their functionality and functional attributes. There are numerous potential meanings that can be associated with a brand.

The categorization of brand meanings is not “clear cut” and “discrete,” and different meanings can overlap. Brands can have different meanings for different people. The five key meanings a brand can have are:

- **Cultural Meaning.** This refers to when brands embody and represent cultural values, beliefs, and traditions. This can also include cultural symbolism where brands can become public representations of specific cultures, embodying their distinctive characteristics. Consumers may use brands to express their cultural affiliations and reinforce their cultural identity.
- **Social Meaning.** Certain brands may signify social class or prestige while others represent membership in specific social groups or subcultures. Brands can also embody social responsibility by taking a stance on social issues that become part of its meaning.
- **Emotional Meaning.** Brands can evoke emotional responses such as nostalgia and excitement.
- **Symbolic Meaning.** This refers to when a brand serves as a symbol for certain values, as a means of self-expression, or for desired lifestyles or personal qualities. Brands can become iconic by becoming symbols of broader concepts or ideals such as speed, passion, luxury, etc.
- **Functional Meaning.** With the functional meaning, the primary appeal of a brand lies in its practical utility, reliability, and efficient problem-solving rather than in an emotional connection, status, or lifestyle aspiration. They do a job, and they do it very well, without much fuss or fanfare.

Marketing professionals are best served when they avoid promoting or focusing on only one type of brand meaning. Professionals ought to avoid embracing only one of these meanings as the absolute solution for every brand and every brand problem. For example, not every business problem can be solved with cultural branding.

Once the brand’s meanings are identified, professionals can then decide how to evolve the brand by determining what type of brand associations would provide a more contemporary expression of meaning and how to add new associations that better reflect current consumer trends and values.

CHAPTER 4

10 Reasons Strong Brand Association Networks Matter

Research findings from numerous sources demonstrate that strong and rich Brand Association Networks play a critical role in brand growth and business performance. The following ten findings highlight why these networks matter.

1. Strong brand association networks increase mental availability, a key success factor for brand growth. Mental availability—the ease with which a brand comes to mind in buying situations—depends on the quality and quantity of a brand’s memory structures, and extensive research shows that brands with higher mental availability grow faster, alongside the support of physical availability.
2. Brands with richer and more positive Brand Association Networks tend to have larger market shares than their competitors.
3. How fast a consumer can access a brand’s Brand Association Network correlates with that brand’s market share. In other words, not only do consumers need to have brand awareness, but even more importantly, a brand needs to be considered before its competitors.
4. Brand association networks that include the key category occasions, needs, and benefits have a higher market share. For example, in the U.S. beer category, the market leader built a broader and richer network of associations tied to the category’s most common drinking occasions, emotions, and product benefits, while smaller brands focused on narrower, more specific occasions and therefore reached fewer buyers.
5. Brands with strong association networks have a stronger impact on business metrics such as long-term growth, customer acquisition, and brand profit growth.
6. Two-thirds of a brand’s growth comes from strong Brand Association Networks, meaning future growth depends largely on the strength and richness of those associations. Brands that combine meaning, differentiation, and salience grow three times faster than brands that rely on salience alone.
7. Meaningful difference—brands with Brand Association Networks that are both meaningful to consumers and differentiated from competitors—explains 80% of why consumers buy a brand. Brands with stronger meaningful difference outperform those that lack clear, distinctive associations.
8. Brands with meaningful and different Brand Association Networks grow five times faster.
9. Consumers are willing to pay 14% more for brands with meaningful and different Brand Association Networks.
10. Neglecting maintaining a brand’s meaningful difference leads to a decline over time.

CHAPTER 5

Associations Brands Should Focus On

There are a few models or frameworks that can guide thinking when it comes to which brand associations to focus on. Some of the most relevant are:

Kantar’s “Meaningfully Different” Philosophy

Perhaps the simplest way to decide which brand associations to focus on is to use Kantar’s philosophy: focusing on brand associations that are “meaningfully different.” This means a brand should focus on those brand associations that include relevant consumer needs, i.e. “the physical, emotional, functional, social and other ways that brands work in consumers’ lives” as well as brand associations that help “create memories that separate the brand from others.”

“Category Entry Points” by the Ehrenberg Bass Institute

Category Entry Points (CEPs) are the reasons, situations, or triggers that prompt consumers to start thinking about buying a product or service in a certain category. They are the moments or needs that put someone “in the market” for a product, even before they think of any specific brand.

Brands that associate themselves with these CEPs are more easily remembered and therefore more likely to be chosen at those moments. Following this logic, the more CEPs a brand is associated with, the more successful it will be. While Category Entry Points are a great way to look at brand associations, they can be hard and impractical to implement, and they can be of more use to larger rather than smaller brands.

Keller’s “Customer-Based Equity” (CBBE) Model

According to this model, building strong brands involves 4 levels: Identity, Meaning, Responses, and Relationships, comprising 6 brand building blocks that can be visualized as a pyramid. These building blocks, from bottom to top, are brand salience, brand performance, brand imagery, brand judgments, brand feelings, and brand resonance. According to Keller’s model, brand associations need to:

Strong Brand Association Networks do not form by accident; they are built deliberately and strengthened over time.

”

- Help consumers clearly identify the category and the brand.
- Help the brand stand out in that category.
- Clearly communicate what needs the brand satisfies or benefits it provides and how it does so better than other brands.
- Clearly communicate emotional or psychological benefits or brand values that help define the brand's imagery and personality.
- Elicit a favorable emotional response and positive attitude towards the brand.

Additional Considerations

When determining what association your brand should focus on, you should consider the network of associations rather than the original associations. Not one single brand association can, or is meant to, do all the heavy lifting. Instead, each association is a piece of the puzzle that provides the whole picture.

Small and large brands will have different focuses. Small brands typically have limited resources, so they need to focus, and since their brand associations are often weak, they need to invest over time in continuously reinforcing their associations and establishing their distinctive brand assets without immediate return while also convincing consumers to purchase their products. They also need to focus on stealing shares within the category.

Bigger brands, on the other hand, already have a series of brand associations they can build on. As a result, brand stewards of established brands need to clearly understand the core associations that drive their business and continuously nurture and refresh them.

Sometimes refreshing and reframing existing associations is all you need. Well-established brands need to watch out for outdated brand associations that may turn customers away. In most cases, it is best to just refresh or reframe an association rather than getting rid of it completely.

Not all associations need to do all the heavy lifting. For a brand to be relevant, it needs to associate itself with some of the core consumer drivers in a given category even if those

associations are generic. It is perfectly okay to use a generic but category relevant association but complement it with associations that help the brand feel different.

Southwest Airlines is an example of this. They started as a low-cost carrier with a clear emphasis on low prices. They were not the only airline to do this, however. They differentiated themselves via its humor brand personality. Generic benefit and differentiating personality triggered an emotional response toward the brand, creating a powerful mix even though each individual association is generic.

When selecting the right associations, start with core consumer needs and wants and the key category drivers—focusing on a specific consumer segment if the brand is small, or on the broader category if the brand is dominant. The priority is to understand what consumers truly want in a product.

CHAPTER 6

Brand Assets—Brand Associations with Superpowers

Distinctive brand assets, also called brand codes or fluent devices, are types of brand associations that deserve a specific mention because they are brand associations with unique characteristics and powers. They appear to be seriously understated by too many marketers and therefore represent an opportunity for clever brand stewards.

Brand assets are the unique and recognizable elements of a brand that set it apart from competitors and make it instantly identifiable to consumers. They are the sensory and symbolic cues that, over time, became synonymous with the brand in the consumer's mind.

These can be visual or auditory, and they can include colors, shapes, slogans or phrases, characters, and scents. These brand assets are important because they give each brand a unique and immediately recognizable fingerprint, and, if established strongly and distinctively, they act as a shortcut to the brand's association network. It is extremely difficult for a brand to create strong associations without distinctive brand assets.

It is important to mention that most package designs do not put enough emphasis on creating highly distinctive brand assets. Distinctiveness and distinctive brand assets mean something different in every category and for every brand, but it feels like a lot of package design work misses the opportunity to create something really unique and distinctive. Instead of focusing just on beauty, they should try to radically break the category conventions and just “look different.”

Numerous chocolate brands such as Milka, Toblerone, and Tony Chocolonely were able to successfully do this. One study found that 15% of all tested brand assets were contributing to brand salience by acting as a shortcut to the brand’s Brand Association Networks and by helping build brand equity over time.

Brand assets play different roles at different stages of a company’s life cycle. Small brands with little awareness and recognition need to invest in distinctive brand assets, even though these investments may not yield immediate results. Like compound interest, their impact grows over time, making distinctive brand assets foundational from the very beginning.

CHAPTER 7

9 Strategies to Create Strong Brand Association Networks

Strong Brand Association Networks do not form by accident; they are built deliberately and strengthened over time. Several factors contribute to the formation of strong and rich Brand Association Networks, including:

1. **A clear branding position.** The starting point of any successful brand is a clear understanding and internal alignment of the desired brand associations you want to create and pair with your brand. This is your brand’s positioning. A lack of clarity for consumers usually starts with a lack of clarity among the brand stewards.
2. **Repetition, repetition, repetition.** Strong association networks take time to build. Continuity and consistency over time as well as systematic communication of the desired brand associations across all touchpoints are essential to strengthen memory associations. Familiarity breeds liking.
3. **Make it emotional.** Emotional brand experiences, including anything from an ad to a physical touchpoint, make associations more memorable.
4. **Multisensory stimuli.** Engaging multiple senses during consumer interactions create stronger, more vivid memories.
5. **Storytelling.** Stories forming a coherent narrative tend to be recalled better. Emotional engagement triggers the release of neurotransmitters like dopamine and oxytocin which enhance memory consolidation and retrieval. Additionally, the narrative structure of a story helps organize information, creating mental frameworks that facilitate recall.
6. **Memorable brand experiences.** Memorable brand experiences, even in the form of small brand consumer touchpoints such as a customer service exchange, can have a huge impact on the brand’s perception and the brand’s association networks.
7. **Distinctive and unique brand assets.** Including brand assets that are unique and distinctive to the desired associations a brand seeks to establish—and communicating them continuously and systematically over time and across touchpoints—makes access to and retrieval of the brand’s association network easier and faster.
8. **Personal relevance and importance.** Brand information that is personally relevant, has emotional significance, or is aligned with your values and prior knowledge is more easily remembered and integrated in the brand’s association network.
9. **Recency.** Brand associations, just like memories, fade over time. The brand’s association network therefore needs to be consistently and continuously reinforced in consumers’ minds.

CHAPTER 8

The Undervalued Opportunities

Brand Association Networks are formed through the cumulative effects of all the encounters consumers have with that specific brand. Some of them are within the control of the brand itself, but most are outside of the company’s control.

There are numerous broad sources of brand associations such as personal experiences, recommendations from family and friends, social media, expert recommendations, news and media, and a brand’s own marketing communications and media. While the role of the various brand touchpoints differs by brand, category, and consumer segment, there are two undervalued opportunities that can create strong Brand Association Networks.

Examining why brands fail can be just as instructive as understanding how they grow. ”

1. Personal Brand Experiences

Brands could and should, based on their resources, turn any touchpoint they have with consumers into a memorable and exciting experience that builds and strengthens the brand associations and help reap all the benefits of strong association networks. You can do this by positively surprising consumers at touchpoint and exceeding the expectations they might have.

Will Guidara writes about this in his book, *Unreasonable Hospitality*, when he discusses how staff members will occasionally feed the parking meters of their guests to ensure that guests do not get a ticket. These memorable touchpoints do not need to be expensive; they just need to create a wow moment.

Touchpoints can be positive, neutral, or negative, and it is best to address the latter first, ideally turning negative touchpoints into surprising customer experiences that exceed consumers' expectations. Identifying a normal or mundane touchpoint and turning it into a surprising customer experience that exceeds consumers' expectations and makes the customer feel like they are being taken care of will have significantly more impact on your brand's perception than having an exhaustive overview of all your touchpoints.

2. Advertising

The role of advertising is to build, refresh, and maintain mental availability—the ability to recall a brand's association network quickly and easily. Advertising does this by breaking through consumer attention and telling engaging, emotional stories that bring relevant themes to life, while clearly establishing the brand's assets.

Emotional advertising has a greater impact than non-emotional advertising. However, research shows that highly emotional ads without distinctive brand assets lose much of their effectiveness and can perform worse than non-emotional ads.

CHAPTER 9

14 Proven Principles of Brand Growth

Before outlining the principles of brand growth, it is important to clarify a key distinction that appears repeatedly across

brand-growth frameworks: the difference between *differentiation* and *distinctiveness*.

Differentiation refers to how a brand is positioned relative to competitors—specifically, how it creates a unique and meaningful place in consumers' minds through the associations it stands for.

Distinctiveness, by contrast, refers to how easily a brand is recognized and remembered, often through distinctive brand assets such as visual identity, symbols, and other sensory cues.

While some research emphasizes distinctiveness as the primary driver of brand success and others highlight the importance of differentiation, the evidence suggests that both matter. Strong brands combine clear, meaningful differentiation with distinctive assets that make those associations easy to recognize and recall—an approach reflected in the principles that follow.

1. The brand focuses its growth on increasing penetration. This is done within a clearly defined and understood consumer segment if the brand is small, or it is done by continuously reaching all category buyers when the brand is large.
2. The brand understands that creating a differentiating Brand Association Network is critical to grow penetration and market share when it is small or operating in a new category. They also understand that distinctiveness becomes increasingly critical as it grows and expands in size.
3. Brand stewards understand that the objective of their brand activities is to help create brand predisposition and mental availability.
4. The brand's stewards have a thorough and shared understanding of consumers' core drivers, needs, behaviors, perceptions, beliefs, and feelings towards the category and the brand.
5. The brand stewards have identified and are aligned on a set of desired brand associations they want to create and associate with their brand to drive the brand's growth over the next three to five years.
6. This set of desired brand associations meets consumers' needs and delivers both tangible and intangible benefits that consumers truly desire, while creating

the perception of being different from their competing alternatives.

7. Brand stewards understand that the growth of their brand is determined by their ability to develop a brand association network that aligns with the critical category needs, benefits, emotions, and occasions to ensure brand relevance.
8. The brand understands that all its activities should help create an emotional connection with consumers and elicit an emotional reaction at its touchpoints, thus helping the brand stand out, grow, and strengthen its Brand Association Network.
9. The brand nurtures and reinforces its distinctive brand assets across all touchpoints, understanding the unique characteristics and opportunities of each.
10. The brand invests sufficient resources to continuously refresh and reinforce its Brand Association Network, thus making it easier to be remembered first at the moment of purchase.
11. The brand consistently strikes a balance between reinforcing its core brand associations without diluting them while staying interesting, fresh, and timely in its expression, product innovation, and other brand behaviors.
12. The brand makes it easier for more people to buy it in more situations by identifying the potential reasons consumers might not purchase.
13. The brand stays ahead of the competition by not giving consumers reasons not to buy the brand and potentially creative negative brand associations.
14. The brand conducts regular audits to assess and monitor its health and understand the source of its brand equity.

pand the category by increasing consumer penetration in adjacent categories or by trying to grow the category overall.

3. As a newer brand, you are focusing too much on customer retention and not enough on customer acquisition.
4. You and your executive team are not clear and aligned on the five or so brand associations you want to create around your brand.
5. Because you are not clear and aligned internally on what brand associations to focus on, you let your various communication agencies prescribe the direction—strategic and executional—of your brand.
6. Because you are not clear on which associations will drive your business growth, you act reactively to competing initiatives in that category.
7. You have defined a series of desired brand associations but they either do not tap into consumers' needs, do not provide clear value, or do not trigger an emotional response from consumers.
8. Your brand isn't different enough from your competition, neither at the strategic level nor at the executional level.
9. You do not have truly distinctive brand assets that help your brand stand out even though your design might look beautiful.
10. You are not systematically leveraging your brand assets at every touchpoint.
11. If you are an established brand, you do not have a clear idea of the core brand associations that have made you successful.
12. You are not communicating above your weight class within your desired consumer segment and thus not achieving an excessive share of voice.
13. You have clear brand associations, but they are not brought to life in an attention getting, interesting, or fresh way.
14. You are not consistently focused on building your brand association network.
15. While you have good and strong brand associations, you also have negative associations that have not been addressed and that prevent consumers from buying your brand.
16. Most of your brand/consumer touchpoints are purely transactional and none of them delights and exceeds consumer expectations, thus missing an opportunity to create an over-proportional brand impact.

CHAPTER 10

16 Reasons Why Your Brand Fails

While clear principles help explain how brands grow, examining why brands fail can be just as instructive. Understanding the barriers to success and the common reasons brands fall short often makes it easier to recognize problems early and address them effectively. The following sixteen reasons highlight where brands most often go wrong.

1. Lack of understanding of your core consumer segment.
2. As a larger brand, you target too small a consumer segment within your category instead of trying to ex-

Brands live in the minds of consumers and are built one memory and one association at a time.

”

CHAPTER 11

Strategies to Overcome and Avoid Negative Brand Associations

There may be situations where a brand suffers from negative associations that hinder its growth and hold consumers back from buying that brand. There are several ways to overcome negative brand perceptions and associations. The first is to address the negative association directly and truthfully. The second is to tap into the brand's heritage to dust off an emotional consumer truth that can be turned into a positive brand association.

This approach consists of reminding people of their personal and emotional experiences with the brand. A third method is to reframe the negative association into a more positive one, if you can do so credibly. Fourth, a company may adapt their product offering to make their brand more accessible and increase usage occasions. Fifth, a company can refresh their core associations.

There might be cases where a brand isn't necessarily associated with any major negative association that prevents consumers from buying the brand. It could simply be that the brand's associations, while still relevant, feel a bit outdated, haven't kept up with competing activities, have lost their salience, or have simply not been executed and brought to life in a contemporary and fresh way.

Companies should beware of the dangers of messing with the brand's user imagery and user base. This risk arises when negative brand associations are tied to perceptions of the current consumer base.

What are the implications for brand stewards?

1. Understand your brand's Brand Association Network, both the positive associations and the negative ones.
2. Be able to make the distinction between negative associations that need to be addressed and associations that may appear to be negative but may just need a refresh and reframing.
3. Realize the power of emotions and human truth consumers can relate to in overcoming more rational negative associations.
4. When targeting a new consumer segment, make sure that you are not ignoring, or even worse, denigrating your current consumer base, the one that has made you successful until now.
5. Understand and change if necessary the brand's attributes around size, format, price points, etc. to make your brand appealing and accessible to as many category buyers as possible.

CHAPTER 12

Researching, Measuring, and Integrating Brand Associations

Researching brand associations can be challenging, but it does not need to be overly complex. A range of qualitative and quantitative methods can be used to identify and assess brand associations.

Qualitative methodologies can include anything from focus groups to one-on-one interviews, online panel discussions, to social monitoring. The interview techniques you can use can also vary widely from in-depth psychological explorations (best done by experts), direct or open-ended questions or projective techniques.

You can also use quantitative methods common in marketing such as benefit or attribute rankings, and tracking studies, to much more sophisticated methodologies such as implicit association test, electro-encephalography (EEG), eye-tracking, etc. Those are more "rigorous" but also take longer and are significantly more expensive.

Regardless of the methods employed, research into brand associations should focus on answering a few fundamental questions.

1. What are the most important associations?
2. How important are they in driving brand preferences?
3. How unique are they to your brand?

Effective research typically combines qualitative and quantitative approaches. Initial insights can often be drawn from existing data, direct observation, and analysis of the category and its competitors. Consumer feedback from reviews,

websites, and social media can also provide valuable signals, particularly around the associations driving the category. Any research effort should be grounded in a solid understanding of brand associations.

There is no universal research methodology to help you track brand associations. That is okay. Be pragmatic about it and use the method that will best fit your unique situation and resources.

Conclusion

Brands don't live in board rooms, marketing departments or flashy philosophies. They live in the mind of consumers and are built one memory and one association at a time, shaped by consistent exposure, reinforced by emotion, and anchored through distinctive assets.

Building strong brands ultimately comes down to a few fundamentals. Successful brand stewards understand what consumers associate with their brand today, not what they hope those associations to be. They define a small number of associations that truly drive preference, reinforce them consistently across all touchpoints, and protect them over time.

There is no shortcut or fashionable framework that replaces this work. Long-term brand success is the result of applying these fundamentals with discipline and consistency.



Ulli Appelbaum is an award-winning marketing and brand strategist with more than 30 years of experience building distinctive brands worldwide. He is the author of the award-winning book *The Brand Positioning Book*, widely regarded as a leading guide to modern brand positioning. Appelbaum has held senior strategy roles at global agencies including BBDO, Leo Burnett, Fallon Worldwide, and SapientNitro, contributing to multiple Effie Awards and an ARF Ogilvy Award. His work has shaped brands such as Wrigley, Harley-Davidson, Hallmark, Nestlé, Procter & Gamble, and Chrysler. He founded the strategy boutique First The Trousers Then The Shoes in 2014.

The Science of Brand Associations: Win Minds, Win Markets by Ulli Appelbaum. Copyright© 2025 by Ullrich Appelbaum. Summarized by permission of the Publisher, Ullrich Appelbaum. ISBN 979-8296541109. Summary published by Soundview Executive Book Summaries®. Copyright 2026 Soundview, Inc. All rights reserved. Reproduction in whole or in part is prohibited. For permissions and reprints, please contact service@summary.com. 48SS02A