



# Building a human brand: Brand anthropomorphism unravelled

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**Abstract** Brand anthropomorphism has been found to enhance the ability of consumers to recognize the inherent value of brands. However, there is limited knowledge among practitioners on how to build a brand with humanlike characteristics. After a literature review of brand anthropomorphism in general and the theory of warmth and competence in particular, we present the Human Brand Model of how to build a brand that is perceived to be human. There are four steps in this process; the first three indicate the brand inputs and the last indicates the results of those inputs. This model guides brand managers on how to make their brand more human. The use of this model should result in the organization having an excellent brand reputation; stronger, more meaningful relationships with its customers; and improved brand loyalty.

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## 1. The need for anthropomorphism in branding

Brands create value for organizations. One way of enhancing that value is through brand anthropomorphism. This article sets out to decipher whether the notion of a human brand is a fanciful fabrication or an idea that has both academic and practical significance. Due to a rebirth of traditional,

wholesome values, consumers are growing increasingly fond of humanized brands and now even relate to brands in the same way they relate to people (Brown, 2010). Brands that succeed in times when brand trust is low are those that foster meaningful relationships with customers by coming across as human (Kervyn, Fiske, & Malone, 2012). Ascribing humanlike attributes to brands (i.e., brand anthropomorphism) has been found to enhance consumers' ability to recognize the inherent values of a brand (Morhart, Malär, Guèvremont, Girardin, & Grohmann, 2015). A need for more authentic, humanlike brands can also be attributed to the fact that consumers today relate to brands in the same

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way they relate to people (Fournier, 1998). The social standards that govern interpersonal relationships between people now appear in the relationships between people and brands (Aggarwal, 2004).

According to Brown (2010), the appeal of using anthropomorphism in marketing is poorly understood. Brand managers need a greater mastery of brand anthropomorphism and how they should build and manage the human brand. The objectives of this article are (1) to advance our practical knowledge of brand anthropomorphism expressed through perceived warmth and competence in brands and (2) to develop a framework that will aid practitioners in the development of human brands. We first discuss brand anthropomorphism, followed by the theory of warmth and competence. Then, we present how to build the human brand, along with a model of the human brand.

## 2. What is brand anthropomorphism?

*Anthropomorphism* refers to the attribution of humanlike characteristics, motivations, intentions, and emotions to nonhuman entities (Epley, Waytz, & Cacioppo, 2007). Academic research on the anthropomorphism of brands first became prevalent with the brand personality framework, which deals with inference of human personality traits onto brands (Aaker, 1997). Since then, there has been ongoing work on brand anthropomorphism, including further studies on brand personality (Aaker, Fournier, & Brasel, 2004) and interrelated concepts such as consumer-brand relationships (Fournier, 1998, 2009) and brand love (Batra, Ahuvia, & Bagozzi, 2012). Fournier (1998) found that people relate to brands in the same way as they relate to other people, and even have relationships with them. Today, this idea is widely accepted in marketing (Fournier & Alvarez, 2012). More recently, brand anthropomorphism has been studied in relation to brand perception (Kervyn et al., 2012).

Kim and McGill (2011) posited that there are two types of brand anthropomorphism. The first is analogical in nature, in which schematic indicators are used to create cognitive associations with human characteristics. For example, a brand that meets customer expectations is perceived as trustworthy. The quality of trustworthiness—usually reserved for people—makes the brand seem more human. Theories on brand personality belong in this first category (Kim & McGill, 2011). Aaker's (1997) well-known brand personality scale identified five traits of brand personality: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness. There are

strong similarities between sincerity and warmth (Kervyn et al., 2012). With this first type of brand anthropomorphism, human qualities are simply observable traits in the brand (Kim & McGill, 2011). This notion that brands can be infused with humanlike traits is no longer questioned in academic research (Bennett & Hill, 2012).

Kim and McGill (2011) stated that the second form of anthropomorphism in marketing takes consumers a step closer to really believing that a brand is human. In this instance, the brand is perceived as having a humanlike mental state (Kim & McGill, 2011). An anthropomorphized brand is a palpable entity with senses, goals, a mentality, a temper, and even an appetite for power (Fournier & Alvarez, 2012). Puzakova, Kwak, and Rocereto (2009, p. 413) referred to anthropomorphized brands as having "various emotional states, mind, soul and conscious behaviors." In brand anthropomorphism of this nature, the consumer starts to view the brand as having a deep capacity for care and concern (i.e., warmth) (Kim & McGill, 2011). Brands that can achieve this make it far easier for consumers to draw real comparisons between their interpersonal relationships and their relationships with brands (Kim & McGill, 2011; Malone & Fiske, 2013). Just as they do with people, it has become clear that consumers relate to and evaluate brands. Brand managers need to actively manage this.

## 3. The theory of warmth and competence

The Stereotype Content Model (SCM), a well-established model from social psychology (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2007), provides a theoretical framework to better understand the humanization of brands. Kervyn et al. (2012) utilized this model as the basis for their study of the way in which consumers perceive, feel about, and relate to brands. The SCM states that people form social perceptions about others based on the evaluation of two dimensions: warmth and competence (Cuddy et al., 2007, 2008; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002). *Warmth* is felt when one perceives another to have good intentions, and *competence* is felt when one perceives another to have the ability to carry out those intentions (Fiske et al., 2002). According to Cuddy et al. (2008), warmth traits include being good-natured, trustworthy, tolerant, friendly, and sincere; while competence traits include being capable, skillful, intelligent, and confident. Aaker, Vohs, and Mogilner (2010) posed this question: Do people then evaluate brands on the same basis of warmth and competence?

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