Constellations to identify Branding Problems

This article presents the findings of a study of constellations applied to identify branding problems. A case study, named 'The Branding Constellation' illustrates the value of this application.

Since the 1990s, constellations have found their way into organisational and managerial contexts. Many of the applications concern personal relationship and supervision issues. There are also opportunities for applying constellations in marketing as indicated by Hellinger in an interview with Del Pozo (1999).

In marketing, it is generally accepted that the practice of thinking of non-living elements as human-like facilitates interactions with the world. The commonly used brand-as-a-person metaphor is a special case of this anthropomorphosis: Is brand X to you young or old? Is it a man or a woman? Is she sexy or serious? The concordant brand personality concept is the projection of human characteristics on to brands. A related construct in marketing is the positioning notion. This refers to the way people perceive the relationships between brands as opposed to the way companies want their brands to be seen in comparison to other brands. These relationships are usually presented in two-dimensional space to denote psychological distance between brand perceptions. Psychodrama is a recognised technique in qualitative marketing research on brands in which the relationship between consumers and brands is played out on a stage. Applying constellations to brands is thus a logical extension of such work.

THE ISSUE

Developing brands is one of the top priorities in marketing. Brands represent a considerable amount of money. The value of the Coca-Cola brand is for instance today estimated at $US 67 million. Yet there are many shortcomings in the way companies introduce new brands. A well-sited illustration of this in the marketing literature is the 1985 introduction of the sweeter coke in the USA under the name of New Coke. In 1985 the Coca-Cola Company spent four million dollars and two years of research on extended product tests, in which 190,000 Canadian and American consumers were asked whether they preferred the sweeter taste of the cola.

These tests were 'blind' in the sense that the consumers were not informed that the cola was the 'real' coke. It was found that 61% of the respondents preferred the sweeter taste to the current one. But as Coca-Cola brought New Coke to the market the 'real' Coke drinkers rebelled; even those who could not tell the difference in blind-product tests wanted 'their product' back. Coca-Cola was sued for neglecting the American legacy and brought back the original coke under the name Coca-Cola Classic. The taste turned out to be only a minor element within the Coke brand.

A systemic perspective on such problems is lacking. Common market research on brands is generally narrowed down to relationships between two elements and it is assumed that all other brand elements are not influenced by these changes. In the Coca-Cola case the research focused solely on the relationship between product and taste without taking the brand history into account.

We saw that identifying branding problems from a systems per-spective may help us avoid such errors as these and open up for us other questions that needed further exploration.

This led us, in 2001 to initiate a PhD research project using constellations – termed branding constellations – to identify branding opportunities. This article describes the research project, presents a case study, and discusses the findings.

BRANDING CONSTELLATION RESEARCH PROJECT

Commencing in 2002 the Dutch branding constellation research project explored 32 branding constellations in four settings:

1. Three forum conferences involving brand experts – seven cases.

2. Two conferences for brand problem owners only – nine cases.

3. Two other facilitator conferences where the constellations were done by another facilitator – eight cases.

4. Twenty experimental cons-tellation meetings attended by people who were interested in constellation work rather than

brands, where brand managers who wanted to do a constellation were given priority – eight cases.

This article focuses on a constellation with a brand manager of an international baby food brand. It was the first case in the first Forum Conference (8 November 2002). The usefulness of constellations was evaluated over time by means of:

- A conversation with the facilitator directly after the constellation.

- A conference questionnaire directly after an evaluation round at the end of the day.

- An e-mail questionnaire after three months.

- A reflection two years later at the 2004 Forum Conference.

- A reflection on the case study report of the baby food constellation by Harrewijn (2006) as part of her final marketing thesis.

In the following sections, the branding problem is described, then the initial 'projection' constellation, the main intervention by the facilitator, and finally the 'vision' constellation. The article closes with the experiences of the baby food brand manager and the brand experts, and a reflection on these experiences.

Brand Manager's Baby Food Branding Problem

This baby food brand is owned by a multi-national company which develops, produces and sells a broad assortment of dairy products and fruit juices to consumers, professional users and industrial customers. For almost sixty years, the baby nutrition range has consisted of three milk products: one for babies from newborn until six months old, one for babies from six months to approximately a year, and one for babies over a year old.

The brand manager, who joined this company in 2001, was worried by the results of market research carried out in November 2002 which indicated that mothers lacked any emotional connection to the brand. In October 2002, the brand's range was extended to cover pot food and porridge. While the brand manager had developed a new advertising campaign to address the extension, she still felt uneasy. Her financial manager, who was informed about the branding constellation research project by the researcher, indicated to her the opportunity of doing a constellation on her advertising campaign. As this idea appealed to her, she joined the 2002 Forum Conference.

Baby Food Branding Constellation

The branding constellation process will be described in four phases: the systemic dialogue, the projection phase, the main intervention by the facilitator, and the 'vision' constellation.

1. Systemic Dialogue

In the branding constellation project, the 'systemic interview' was called 'systemic dialogue' to stress the fact that it was a dialogue between a client as a branding expert and a facilitator as a systemic expert on an equal, non-hierarchical level. The facilitator, Jan Jacob Stam and the conference participants did not have any background information on the cases at their disposal prior to the constellations. At the start of the constellation the facilitator and the brand manager agreed that she would only mention the fact that her company produced baby food products; she did not bring up the brand's name, to prevent the facilitator and the audience from developing personal ideas on the branding problem. The dialogue closed with an agreement on the leading question of the brand manager: Will the new advertising campaign be a success? In other words, will it succeed in communicating the new extended position of the brand and improve the emotional connection of mothers to the brand? As current key elements of the brand, they agreed to include representatives for:

- The senior management of the organisation

- The product(s)

- The old (current) target group (mothers)

- The old (current) campaign.

They also agreed to add to the constellation later on:

- The planned new brand elements

- The new campaign

- The new branding concept

- The new target group

2. Projection Phase

The Projection Phase of branding constellations consists of two parts:

- 'Element Projection': imbuing persons, objects, events or other elements with characteristics or meanings supposed to be derived from subconscious emotions; in the research project, the attention was on gender, age, and dress sense.

- 'Systemic Projection': addressing the relationships between these elements by positioning them in the room.

The term 'Element Projection' was chosen to match the way brand managers are accustomed to thinking about brands, as explained

in the introduction. Within the research project, all marketing experts stated that they saw the Element Projection (a concept already familiar to them) as the key to working with branding constellations. This is contrary to most systemic literature, where it is generally stated that it does not make a difference who is chosen as a representative. On the other hand, (implicitly) it is often argued that the choice of representatives by a client needs to be a true sign of their unconscious feelings and ideas on these elements. In addition, the fact that they intuitively choose an old or a young female or male is often referred to as an unconscious sign of their relationship with that element.

Table 1 presents the brand manager's Element Projection.

Element / Characteristic	Gender	Age
Organisation (its senior mngrs)	Male	40 - 50
Product	Male	40 - 50
Old (current) target group	Female	30 - 40
Old (current) campaign	Male	30 - 40
New Concept	Female	30 - 40
New target group	Female	30 - 40
New campaign	Female	30 - 40

Table 1

Table 1 shows that the female brand manager chose a man for Organisation, Old Campaign, and Product; and a woman for Old and New Target Group, New Concept, and New Campaign. Remarkably, all new elements are female, while in the old situation only the target group is female. This is in line with her feedback that she thought the approach of the mothers was too male-oriented. Concerning age, most women at the 2002 Conference were in their thirties, so hardly any conclusions can be drawn on that point. Portraying Organisation and Product as older than Old Campaign seems rather logical as they have a longer history.

The brand manager set up four representatives: one for the Senior Managers in the Organisation, one for the Product, one for the Existing Target Group, and one for the Old (current) Campaign. After that, she noticed that she had put Organisation with his back to all the other representatives: Product, Existing Customers, and Current Campaign. She then turned him around so that he could see the other key branding elements. This move made Product feel better. Further small movements of Product did not improve the situation as he was still falling backwards, so the brand manager left it that way. *Fig. 1* presents the initial positions within the research project, referred to as the Systems Projection Constellation.

P: Product
O: Senior Managers of Organisation
OC: Old (current) Campaign
OT: Old (current) Target group
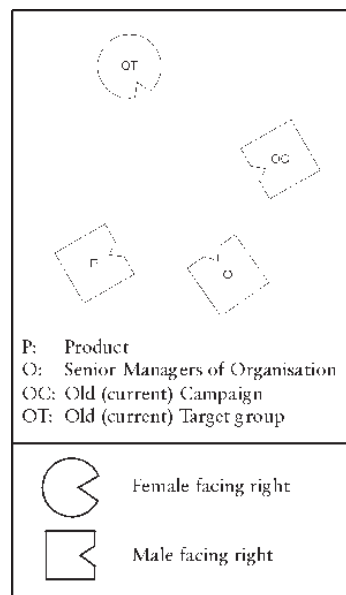
Female facing right

Male facing right

Fig.1

In this Systemic Projection Constellation, Organisation had the feeling that Product wanted to stand in the middle and push him away. Product did not feel good and did not dare to look at Target Group. After taking a step backwards at the instigation of the facilitator, Product felt better and Organisation felt less threatened by

Product. Product felt connected to Old Campaign, while Old Campaign wondered why he did not feel connected to Target Group. Old Target Group felt strong and felt like saying something like, 'Come on', but nothing was coming. She felt good in her own place and did not feel like moving closer to the others.

3. MAIN INTERVENTION

Then the facilitator asked the brand manager about the age of the product. Hearing the brand manager answer: "Fifty to sixty years," Product reflected that he felt much older and wiser than the others. Next, the facilitator asked whether something unfortunate had happened to the product in the past. As the brand manager stated that she did not know, the facilitator constellated with her consent: Harmed-Customers and Former Manager. Former Manager did not bring any energy into the constellation and was asked to sit down again. The situation changed after the facilitator constellated Children of the Harmed Customers. The statement of the Children of the Harmed Customers was: "We are OK. What an arrogance to think that our health depends on you." This grounded Product and opened him for action.
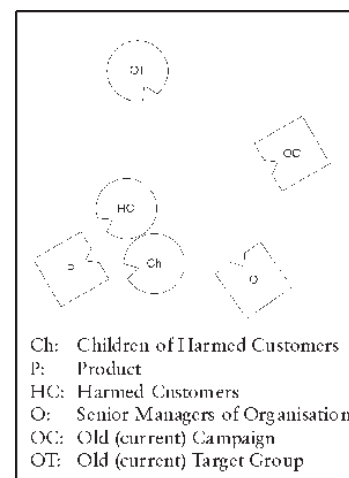

Ch: Children of Harmed Customers
P: Product
HC: Harmed Customers
O: Senior Managers of Organisation
OC: Old (current) Campaign
OT: Old (current) Target Group

Fig. 2

Fig. 2 shows the core constellation at the point of this main intervention by the facilitator.

4. Vision Constellation

The process thus far had taken about an hour, including the systemic introduction dialogue. Next the brand manager constellated New Concept, New Target Group, and New Campaign. She had trouble persuading Old Campaign to sit down as he – as well as the other constellated elements – did not feel that he should leave the constellation. Organisation was willing to welcome New Campaign, but only if Old Campaign could stay as well. Organisation also wanted to have New Concept close to him. Product was a bit afraid of the new constructs because they were more demanding than the old ones. Old Target Group liked New Campaign as she brought new energy into the constellation. However, New Concept felt best when she was positioned next to Old Campaign. Old and New Target Group felt best next to each other; and they were happy to see Old Campaign behind New Campaign, but they would have preferred a firmer Product. New Campaign felt strong and wanted to make contact with Old and New Target Group, but to do this she needed a firmer Product too. In the facilitator's view a New Product was missing. However, there was neither time nor energy left to constellate this element. Furthermore constellating a New Product would extend beyond the brand manager's original question. So the facilitator ended the constellation with her consent. *Fig. 3* illustrates the final constellation, called the 'Vision Constellation' in the branding constellation research project.

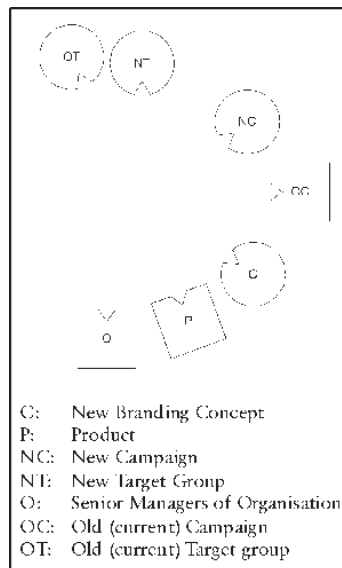The brand manager reported that the constellation had brought up

C: New Branding Concept
P: Product
NC: New Campaign
NT: New Target Group
O: Senior Managers of Organisation
OC: Old (current) Campaign
OT: Old (current) Target group

Fig. 3

many new questions for her to deal with, and she felt, "Confused, but on a different level." The constellation did not solve her branding problem, but gave her an idea of the direction in which she could take action to resolve it.

Brand Manager's Constellation Findings

In the Conference questionnaire completed directly after the constellation, the brand manager stated that she had an answer to her question, but that there were some conditions that needed improving, such as the relationship between the new concept and the campaign. Furthermore, she was unclear what to do with the product. She felt confirmed in her belief that the new concept fitted the product which she had been unsure about before the constellation. She was unsure how the product and the new concept should deal with the old campaign. Furthermore, she concluded that the product felt misplaced in the old situation and would have preferred to be the leader in the system.

She especially recognised the emotions of the organisation and the relationship between the

product and the target group. She did not recognise the emotions of the product, but stated that these emotions had 'opened her eyes'. She felt that the constellation gave a true picture of reality, as the position of the product had been central before. For instance, the relationships between the target group and the campaign/product were recognisable: firstly, they were at a distance, later on they were more involved.

The brand manager was very satisfied with her choice of constellated elements, although she implied that she might have wanted to constellate the competition. She said she had been feeling a bit nervous and anxious at the beginning of her constellation, but that this had changed to curiosity and a positive tension during the constellation. Afterwards, she felt happy and 'eager to continue'. She appreciated the combination of getting confirmation on certain elements and new questions on others.

Here is her one-minute reflection at the end of the 2002 Constellation Conference, which is in line with the statements on the questionnaire directly after her constellation:

"I always have a kind of internal paradox, between being very interested in the woolly, free-floating soft approach – like the constellation work – and the quantitative one because it is also nice to be able to name things, measure them, measure them again and see exactly the same thing. Thus I started with the question: Will it make me feel good about this soft approach or not? I experienced the constellation work as very good. As a marketing person, I think constellations are relevant not for proving things or making choices, but for developing new ideas and new insights which

enable you at a later stage to make better choices. Somebody has already asked: 'What does it mean for market research?' I think it has complementary value leading to better decisions. That is how I see it. What I would want to do with it is indeed something like the constellations that took place this morning. Many things happened where I thought, "Yes, that's it exactly." such us the uneasy feelings I had about the distance between the consumer and the product in the old situation. What struck me was the possibility of adding a new element that would create a situation of greater closeness without excluding anything. That I really liked. What bothers me now is the organisation and what happened in the past. When I go back now, will I talk about this with my colleagues? Certainly. In the future, I would like to do another constellation and bring a colleague with me, because I believe that one should value looking at various situations and questioning how they came to be that way, so we can act preventatively. Overall, I found the constellation valuable and very challenging."

In January 2003 the brand manager stated on the e-mail questionnaire that the constellation had: generated a new question; confirmed some things and offered the possibility of re-considering others.

The new question: Could there be something wrong with the product?

The confirmation: The old and the new target group can stand next to each other. The new concept and the product go together well.

To be re-considered: Should the old campaign be terminated?

She stated that she had not really gained any new specific insights on the brand, but she felt confirmed

in her belief in the power of the concept for the current product and also in the power of the old campaign in relation to the old target group. The constellation made her think beyond figures and market research results, and made her aware that she was part of the branding system. The constellation did not really result in any immediate branding changes. She felt like going on with the new campaign, but raised some new questions.

Concerning the truth of the product emotions, she remembered in the e-mail questionnaire that the product had felt unstable and did not dare to look at the target group, but that she was still trying to understand this. Regarding the senior management in the organisation she kept in mind the organisation's statement that the product seemed to want to stand in the middle and push him away. She recognised this as coming from the past as the company had always been product-oriented, and some departments still were. With the old target group, she bore in mind the statement: 'I do not feel like standing closer to Product and Campaign' which confirmed market research findings. With the old campaign she remembered that he had wanted more contact with the old target group, which she recognised although she had not expected this urge to be so strong. With the new concept, she kept in mind that it had felt good standing close to the product, which she recognised as seeming to be right, but she also felt that the concept needed to become clearer.

Concerning the new elements, she remembered that the new target group felt fine next to the old target group, which she found comforting and that the new campaign felt good and wanted to make contact with the target group, which she found very recognisable from customers'

reactions. Remarkably, she could not remember any of the emotions of the three elements constellated by the facilitator in the main intervention. So in summary, after three months she could still remember the emotions and statements of all the elements she had constellated, and was able to link all of them to reality except for the product.

A behavioural indication of the value of the constellation is that she asked the researcher to show the video recording of the constellation to her commercial and financial directors. This was done in January 2003. Both directors also considered the process of the constellation to be true. The constellation generated a lively discussion about the product recall nearly ten years previously and the impact it had had on the current organisation. It was clear that the product recall had been a big trauma for the organisation, and all were astonished that the constellation had brought this up without the brand manager having known anything about it. The constellation confirmed to them that they had handled the situation well.

Finally, here is the five minutes reflection of the brand manager two years later at the November 2004 Branding Experts Conference:

"Two years ago I worked for a big dairy factory in Holland. We were about to re-launch the brand, and more specifically a new campaign. The question we had was: Is the new campaign likely to reach the new target group? I did a constellation that concerned many elements, such as: the product, the company, the old campaign, the new campaign, the old users, and the new users. And in the end, it turned out there was a kind of secret. There were really very many insights. Many things evoked questions that made me think: 'What can I do with

that?'As far as I am concerned there were four very important insights that have stayed in my mind over the past two years. The first was the large distance between the product and the users' group. Despite what had changed in the constellation, that distance remained. For me, this is still something that occupies me and it makes me want to do something about it. The brand is about baby food, and you can imagine that the distance between the product and the user group should be small, smaller than with any other user group you might analyse. This still keeps me busy. The second insight was that the new campaign was repressing the old campaign, which was not acceptable for the old campaign. In hindsight, I think the old campaign was probably right, as the new campaign had taken on many of the characteristics of the old campaign. We had gone a little astray with the new campaign. So this was a valuable retrospective insight. The third insight was that the representative for the senior management in the organisation was standing in the centre during the whole constellation process, repeatedly demanding a central role. I can't do much with this, apart from keep it in mind. The fourth and last insight has impressed me most. The secret started apologising to the users' group for the fact that she was a secret. I think that this is something that happened in the past and is no longer bothering us nor asking for action, and that is that as far as I am concerned. So in total, there were four insights, of which the distance between the product and the users' group is still open and needing to be resolved. What I notice every time I am discussing that is that the distance between the product and the target group

keeps coming back to me. I find that strange. That is what I wanted to say about my reflections on our ability to turn our insights into action."

From the above, we can conclude that after two years the brand manager is able to look back very positively on the insights generated by her constellation, and that many constellation pictures still remain in her mind and have influenced branding strategy over the last two years, but there were also many insights that she could not understand. Comparing her reflection two years after the constellation to the description in the transcription of the video recording, they seem to match well. The brand manager's accurate recollection of her constellation is an indication of the impression it made on her. It is understandable from her position as brand manager that she does not refer to the product recall in her public reflection and calls it 'a secret that has been dealt with adequately in the past'.

In 2006, the baby food constellation was analysed by Harrewijn as part of her marketing thesis at the Open University of the Netherlands to enhance the reliability of the branding constellation research project findings.

Below is the brand manager's reflection on Harrewijn's analysis:

"The description of the constellation and the evaluation in its various aspects are recognisable and seem correct. I can underwrite the managerial implications, and I would be interested in possible applications of the technique in daily management practices. Being a marketing consultant nowadays, I would be interested in specific implications. Although 'impact' is not a factor which has been

taken into account, I think this could be grounds for further research. The impact to me was very high. Almost 4 years have passed since the constellation, and I still remember most of the insights I gained. Unfortunately, it is too late for me to use these in my daily work, as I am no longer a marketing manager for this company. There must be a positive aspect of impact for daily marketing management. The added value lies within the non-rational, very emotional way of approaching brand problems and solutions. I am convinced that emotion in branding is crucial, and I therefore think that constellations can increasingly be used as a tool for brand managers to use in their marketing methods."

From this, it is clear that even after four years the brand manager is able to look back very positively on the insights generated by her constellation.

CONCLUSIONS

Eighteen brand experts joined the 2002 Forum Conference. They were generally impressed by the power of constellations, but suspicious of their replication value. Many doubted the participation of constellation 'experts' – who had just finished their constellation training. In the baby food constellation the current product was represented by one of them, and many brand experts thought he was 'overacting'. These constellation 'experts' had been invited as the facilitator thought it a good idea to have some people in the audience familiar with the process (a procedure that is also followed in brainstorming and other problem identification techniques). The fourth setting in the branding constellation research project was for experimental constellation meetings attended by people

interested in constellation work rather than brands; at these meetings, brand managers who wanted to do a constellation were given priority. In line with the criticism about the over-acting of one representative, this setting was less appreciated by brand managers and current brand experts, many of whom thought that the constellation meeting was a 'gathering of the faithful'. Due to this criticism, no constellation experts were invited to the next Forum Conferences. Thus, applying branding constellations in a meeting attended by people who are interested in constellation work rather than brands or using constellation experts as representatives, should be handled with care. The project findings should not be generalised to all Dutch brand experts as the people present can be characterised as a specific class of brand experts, namely those

that were prepared to take a day off to experience constellation work.

All 32 branding problem owners felt positive about the constellation, although some more than others. The very positive brand managers could be portrayed as extravert, open for change, prepared to look at the larger picture – which is often messy and complex – and in particular at their own role within the branding system. Last but not least, they were open to being involved with processes they could not fully understand. The problem owners who were less positive seemed to be doing a constellation partly as a favour to a colleague. So, the idea in constellation work – that somebody needs to be ready for a constellation – was confirmed.

To conclude, the constellation perspective is still difficult to

combine with the cognitive world of brand management and market research. It requires brand managers to give up the illusion of control. Problems which in 'regular' market research would be viewed as 'independent and separate' are seen in constellation work as inter-dependent and connected. It seems, however, that more and more managers are open to this kind of approach. Constellations seem to fit the 'action-oriented' type of manager who experiences high ambiguity and is used to reducing it by taking action to see what works. The project findings covered branding constellations, but previous constellation dissertation studies have generated similar results on organisational issues, such as Gminder (2006), Lehmann (2006), and Roevens (2006).

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