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Beyond brand loyalty: Brand sustainability

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Historically, measures of brand value have focused on brand awareness, customer brand equity and measured brand loyalty. While useful, these generally provide little visibility for the future of the brand. A new measure, brand sustainability, is proposed, described and illustrated. Drawing on over 1 million responses to online customer questionnaires, over a 10-year period, covering brands in 73 FMCG product categories, we create, illustrate and demonstrate a brand sustainability measure. That measure consists of brand share of preference, a calculation of their average annual growth rate. That is then compared to the consumer-stated no brand preference in that category. Net promoter scores are used to support those calculations. Findings show that manufacturer brands are challenged, not by private label, but by no brand preference in the category. Research suggestions are made on how to develop and use brand sustainability and the impact of that measure on future brand growth and development.

Keywords: brand loyalty; future brand value; net promoter scores; no brand preference; new brand measures

1. Introduction

In this paper, through the use of a substantial, longitudinal consumer database (over 1,100,000 individual responses gathered over a 10-year period on hundreds of brands), we take the concept of brand loyalty to the next level, that of brand sustainability. Brand sustainability is not just the personal use and preference of the brand by the individual user, even measured over relatively long periods of time. Instead, brand sustainability is more about growing the brand outside the current user base so that the brand continues to expand in terms of both volume and profitability over time in a potentially unlimited way.

Simple brand loyalty does not necessarily create brand sustainability, but it is a necessary ingredient in its development. Unless the user substantially increases his or her brand usage during future time periods, making the brand increasingly valuable to the owner, brand sustainability does not occur. For some brands, but not all, increased consumer use is a possibility, but it is not always possible or practical (Aaker and Keller 1990). While ‘trading up’ or migrating through a brand portfolio is one method of growing current customer value, it does not necessarily create brand sustainability as we define it (Aaker 2004). For example, if the current brand user simply maintains purchases or usage, providing a continuing and perhaps even a constant financial return to the brand owner, it is quite possible that loyalty may create a zero-sum game for the brand owner. That is, it may well be that the cost of the brand’s customer retention efforts may well offset the minimal increases in a loyal customer’s purchase/usage over longer periods of time (Smith and Schultz 2005).

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Current customer retention, maintenance and brand loyalty can be easily measured through various forms of individual consumer data capture and various forms of analysis using such techniques as lifetime customer value (LTV) (Berry and Linoff 1997; Churchill 1991; Oliver 1997). Those measures, however, do not tell the full story of a brand’s potential. Other approaches and measures are needed.

We argue that what is not commonly measured or evaluated today is the next level of brand growth and loyalty, which we are calling brand sustainability. This type of internal growth may be referred to as organic growth (Salojarvi, Furu, and Sveiby 2005). That simply means the brand increases its value based on actions and activities that occur inside, rather than outside, the organization. Increased LTV is one form of organic brand growth (Rust, Lemon, and Das 2005) but, we believe, not the most important one. Other sources of organic growth can come from reduced costs (Hess and Kazanjian 2006), more favorable trade terms (Lovelock 1996), lower production or labor costs (Davidsson and Wiklund 2000), but all of these generally come with an associated cost, which may or may not be recovered in future brand sales.

We take a different view of organic growth, that is, we believe organic growth can be developed and increased through the activities of present customers who advocate or promote the brand to their friends, relatives, associates and other relevant persons (Mooney and Rollins 2008). That form of brand advocacy is becoming increasingly relevant as a result of the increasing availability of various forms of social media and other methodologies which make it possible for current users to encourage or generate new users for the brand (Libai et al. 2010). The challenge, of trying to harness and measure this type of internal, customer-generated brand growth, however, is that of identification and measurement (Peppers and Rogers 1999). In this paper, we focus on what we call sustainable brand growth. That is, brand growth that is created by existing loyal customers who encourage other customers to become users and eventually loyal to the brand. For example, based on the current user’s personal satisfaction or their belief that the brand will provide substantial benefits to the recommended others, which might allow them to achieve some of their own personal goals, current users recommend their favored brand(s) to their circle of friends and acquaintances. That may occur via the new social media forms, but it still appears that face-to-face discussions are the primary way through which these recommendations occur (Watts and Dodds 2007). Those recommendations, no matter what form they take, when acted on by the person receiving the recommendation, help build what we are calling brand sustainability. One form of that brand sustainability is the continuous virtuous circle of satisfied customers who advocate the brand to others, who then continue the distribution of the brand accolades to still others and so on. Through this continuing advocacy of the brand, a sustainable and growing group of brand cohorts is built up over time at little or no cost to the brand manager.

The idea of brand sustainability is not entirely new. A few authors, Dauvergne and Lister (2011) and Ind (2003), have mentioned brand sustainability but primarily as a theoretical model. Further, they have developed the concept on a different base than we propose. And, finally, they have not provided actual quantifiable data to support their hypotheses. We believe we are the first authors to provide a demonstrable approach to brand sustainability and demonstrate how it might be identified and measured.

While brand advocacy, such as described earlier has been well researched and written about for a number of years (Kozinets 2002), what is not as clear is how advocacy is generated and how it might be measured. That is the contribution of this paper. Thus, we argue that this new, extended view of the results of brand loyalty, that of brand recommendations, which then create brand sustainability, is the next step in longer-term brand management process.
In the following sections, we develop this more sophisticated brand management concept further. First, we differentiate brand sustainability from the more common use of the term, that of organizational sustainability which is commonly achieved through resource husbandry, corporate social responsibility and the like. Second, we describe the database on which this paper is based. It is a longitudinal data source whereby consumers report their marketplace activities, including whether or not they recommend their current brands to others. Third, we discuss the customer satisfaction methodology used in developing the net promoter score (NPS), which provides the basis for our measures of customer satisfaction and brand promotion. That is the key element in determining potential brand sustainability. Fourth, we provide illustrations of the analysis conducted which might be used to determine and define brand sustainability going forward. Finally, we close with a discussion of conclusions and next steps that might be used to develop this concept further.

2. What is brand sustainability?
The dictionary definition of sustainability is ‘being a method of harvesting or using a resource so that the resource is not depleted or permanently damaged’ (Merriam-Webster 2012, http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sustainable). That seems quite clear, and it is the basic concept of what we mean by brand sustainability – the actions that can be taken which will help the organization increase the value of the brand to both the marketer and the consumer over time. Unfortunately, as a business term, sustainability has been taken to mean a wide and varying number of things. To assure clarity of what we mean, we briefly discuss sustainability in a business sense in the paragraphs below.

Sustainability, in the business use of the term, first began to appear in the academic literature in the 1960s. That is when organizational managers began to realize that their decisions often involved social and environmental issues and if not properly resolved or dealt with could have a major impact on the organization’s long-term success (Salzmann, Ionescu-Somers, and Steger 2005). Starting initially with concerns about corporate social responsibility, that is, what the organization acquired, manipulated and then returned to various social groups (Montiel 2008) such as employees, communities and even countries, the concept developed over time.

Next, senior managers began to focus on how pragmatic approaches to managing those issues could help forestall or limit regulations which might be imposed by various government units (Watkins, Edwards, and Thakrar 2001). Further, it was believed that the management of the firm’s corporate reputation might well assist in improving and enhancing employee recruitment and retention (Salzmann, Ionescu-Somers, and Steger 2005). That, it was believed, would lower operating costs (Armstrong 2007). Thus, another form of sustainability developed.

Since these types of organizational changes generally were expensive, the concept of a ‘financial payoff’ began to appear in the literature in the 1980s (Freeman 1984). That evolved to the development of various types of solutions which the organization might employ to manage these financial issues. These approaches were often referred to as ‘business case for sustainability’ approaches and measures (Steger 2004). Business case for sustainability was eventually defined as ‘a strategic and profit-driven corporate response to environmental and social issues caused through the organization’s primary and secondary activities’. (Salzmann, Ionescu-Somers, and Steger 2005, 27). Clearly, the idea of sustainability in the business sense was maintenance and well-being of the firm, which would reward shareholders, in both the short and long terms.
As various new initiatives and concerns emerged (Van Marrewijk 2003), a critical word surfaced in the literature which changed the corporate view of sustainability. That word was ‘environment’. Questions and concerns about the environment in which the organization operated were the natural progression of an increasingly industrial world. That area had moved to the front of corporate concerns because of various issues such as contamination and leaks, oil spills, nuclear waste and other corporate initiatives that raised the ire of governmental regulatory and interest groups (Salzmann, Ionescu-Somers, and Steger 2005). Thus, safety and protective issues became the heart of sustainability until the turn of the century. At that point, as a result of the US presidential election of 2000, the issues of declining oil reserves, oceanic contamination and, most of all, the question of global warming began to take center stage (Gellspan 2004). That led to a whole new view of sustainability which was focused on the ‘green’ initiatives which focused primarily on conservation of what are perceived to be finite resources to be found on earth (Berke 2002; Smith 2007; Knight 2009).

As can be seen, sustainability has developed and evolved over the last half-century. In this paper, we return to the roots of the term, that is, something that is sustainable can continue to grow, evolve and prosper over time without being destroyed. That is what we propose for brands and branding in this paper. While brands have been assumed to have some type of ‘sustainable’ quality, that is, they grow and evolve over time, there is increasing evidence that brands, like other corporate resources, can decline and fail if not properly managed. It is that sense of finding ways and means of developing, growing and maintaining brands that the proposed methodology has been developed.

3. The longitudinal data used in this study as the base for calculations

Beginning in 2001, Prosper International (www.goProsper.com) began to gather responses from consumer questionnaires which they distributed in the USA on a monthly, semi-annual and random basis. Those questionnaires were designed to generate views and insights from consumers which would and could be useful to various types of marketers, i.e., manufacturer brands, retailers and even media groups. Over time, Prosper developed several types and forms of ongoing questionnaires, one of which is the CIA Monthly Customer Study (MCS) (www.biginsight.com). In that service, a representative sample of consumers are asked a series of current brand and marketing questions. Those questions are answered by respondents through those online questionnaires. The information requested in the MCS questionnaires asks respondents primarily about their purchases of various consumer products, their shopping habits, plans for future purchases, media usage and other marketing-relevant areas relating to various products and services.

The data captured in these studies have been made available to various academic institutions through research grants for academic purposes. The data and the research outcomes have been widely used and distributed (http://blogs.forbes.com/people/mariannebickle; Bickle 2012; Schultz and Block 2010, 2011, 2012). The data used in this study come from the Consumer Intentions and Actions (CIA) Monthly Customer Study databank and are the result of one of those grants.

This particular analysis makes use of the BIGinsight™ CIA Monthly Consumer Studies data. This consists of a monthly online consumer questionnaire distributed and completed by approximately 8000 US respondents in each monthly wave. The dataset used in this study is based on the aggregated results of 130 months of questionnaire responses from January 2002 through October 2012. Those questionnaires generated a total of 1,101,375 responses, with an average of 8472 respondents per questionnaire wave. Thus, the dataset is quite comprehensive and can be evaluated longitudinally. It is,
therefore, much more relevant for the type of analysis developed in this study than other methodologies through which typical one-point-in-time studies of consumer usage is made by other commercial organizations.

For this study, we identified consumer responses to questions in 16 broad consumer product departments normally found in US retail food stores. They included such aisles and categories as household cleaning products, snack foods, frozen foods, breakfast cereal and the like. Although not all food stores use the same categorization system, consumers seem to accept the product assortment in the same way as they shop the retail stores. Therefore, the data used in this study have been organized in the same way.

Those 16 broad food store departments comprised a total of 131 product ranges and 73 specific product categories, each of which has further additional details in terms of reported data for individual brands. The file therefore consists of literally hundreds of brands, depending on how one wants to categorize the data and the number of mentions a specific product would have to have to generate to be considered a brand. Since the data were all captured directly from consumer responses, we have not tried to interpret or recategorize what consumers said.

This level of data gathering enabled us to drill down into specific brand information on products and categories as required, that is, we were able to analyze such product categories as energy drinks, antacids, baby food, paper towels, razors and other classifications and the brands within those categories. Unfortunately, this mass of consumer reported data did create some complications in terms of how to describe and define our discussion of the dataset within the confines of a conference paper. For example, given the amount of data available, it is quite difficult to provide specifics on each of the individual brands analyzed. Thus, we have simplified and aggregated the data, as is described in the following sections.

An example of how the data were initially organized and analyzed will assist the reader in understanding the results that follow. Figure 1 illustrates the organization of the data showing how the store level data were cascaded down to the product level and then to the brand level and finally to the consumer recommending level where the NPS was developed.

The 16 store product categories found in the data are identified in Appendix A. The 73 product categories analyzed to compile this paper are shown in Appendix B.

Four key factors were used in the analysis: (1) a calculation of the share of brand preference for each brand in each product category; (2) an average growth rate (AGR) for

![Figure 1. Data organization.](image)
each brand, either positive or negative, which occurred during study period; (3) a calculation of the no brand preference Share of Market (SOM) and AGR of that brand preference ranking in each of the brand categories; and (4) an NPS for the brand which was derived from respondent’s reports on whether or not they would recommend the brand to friends, associates or others. This NPS number has been asked and captured since the beginning of the CIA studies, thus making it traceable over time.

Each of these analytical elements is described in more detail below.

1. Share of brand preference: in each category, respondents report their favorite brand in that category. Using all responses in that category, the leading brand in each category was determined. For example, in the bleach category, Clorox was the most mentioned brand. Among all the brands reported over the 10-year period, Clorox was mentioned approximately 42% of the time. Thus, Clorox has a 42.01 share of all bleach category mentions over the 10-year period. The same was done for every brand in every category, thus enabling the construction of a matrix of descending SOM order of brands by category, i.e., from those with the highest SOM to the lowest, over the 10-year period.

2. Average growth rate: brand mentions naturally fluctuated over the 10-year period. This was captured by calculating the AGR (or decline) for each brand and each category. These were then averaged to provide an overall view of AGR during the study period.

3. No brand preference: this was a specific question in each of the brand questionnaires in each product category. In other words, when asked ‘what is your favorite brand in this category?’ each respondent could identify a specific brand if they had one. If they had no brand preference in that category, they could select no brand preference as a choice. As with the brand preference, no brand preference also varied by year. Again, all years were averaged to provide an AGR for each brand category. That is shown in the AGR growth or loss rate averaged over the 10-year period.

4. NPS: this was determined by using the same methodology as recommended by Reichheld (2003) in his development of the NPS approach. Simply put, each respondent noted whether or not they would recommend the brand in question to others. Those recommendations took the form of rating the likelihood of recommending that brand on a scale of 1–10 (10 being the highest). Scores of 9 or 10 were then identified as coming from brand promoters. Respondents who said their recommendation would be 1–6 were classified as detractors. Their scores by brand were also totaled. The detractor scores were then deducted from the promoter score, thus providing the NPS for the brand. The NPS scores were then averaged by brand for the study period. Thus, the NPS could be either positive or negative for each brand found in the study.

Those four elements provided the base for the development of our brand sustainability measure. That is discussed in the next section.

4. Background on the construction of the brand sustainability measure

Using the four elements just described, the analysis was conducted in this manner.

Using the leading brand in each product category as the primary selector (that is, brands with the highest SOM in that brand category), a quintile analysis was developed. That was done primarily to facilitate the management of the huge dataset. The quintiles created contained 14 categories in the top and bottom quintiles and 15 product categories in the other three. A summary table of all data is shown in Figure 2.
As can be seen, across all brands in all product categories, the average share of the leading brand was 15.89, meaning when all brand mentions were averaged over the 10-year period; the average SOM for all brands was 15.89%. That provided the benchmark for the brand sustainability measure which follows later.

Interestingly, the AGR for the leading brand in each of the product categories declined on average over the 10-year period by \(-1.68\%\). This AGR is a key element in the recommended brand sustainability model which follows.

The other factor in the brand sustainability measure is the calculation of the share of no brand preference over the measurement period. As can be seen, this number is substantially higher (some four times greater) than the share of leading brand, i.e., no brand preference = 50.22, while leading brand share is only 15.89. Thus, we might conclude, from this very simplistic analysis, that no brand preference is increasing among respondents, while the preference for individual brands is declining. If this is true, it suggests that measures beyond simple brand loyalty are needed by brand managers to properly manage their individual brands. The growth of the no brand preference AGR of \(+1.38\%\) during the study period and the decline in the AGR of the leading brand by some \(-1.68\%\) during the same time should be of concern for all managers of consumer brands being sold in food stores.

Finally, even the average NPS for the leading brand declined by \(-9.07\) points over the survey period. That simply means that on average, the NPS for each of the hundreds of brands evaluated in this study declined by that amount over the study period. This NPS is an important number in the overall development of a brand sustainability measure as will be seen in Section 5.

Using this analysis, it was possible to develop some summary statistics which show the basis for the development of the brand sustainability methodology.

**Figure 2.** Market performance of products.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Stores*</th>
<th>Products**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Share Leading Brand</td>
<td>26.52</td>
<td>15.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AGR Leading Brand</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>-1.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share No Preference</td>
<td>25.66</td>
<td>50.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AGR No Preference</td>
<td>1.21</td>
<td>1.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competitive Index</td>
<td>0.097</td>
<td>0.061</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Net Promoter Score</td>
<td>19.48</td>
<td>-9.07</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Preferred store where product purchased
**+3 product categories averaged over 10 years

As can be seen from the chart above, all but two of the leading brands have a negative AGR (the exceptions being facial tissues – Kleenex and Sports Drinks – Gatorade) during the study period. Alternatively, for no brand preference, only three negative AGRs are reported (again facial tissue – Kleenex and Sports Drinks – Gatorade and a new category,
toilet tissue – Charmin). We discuss these findings in the section on building the brand sustainability measure which follows in Section 6.

Figure 4 shows the data analysis and calculations for the fifth decile, in this case, those categories and brands which have the lowest SOM and, generally, the lowest AGR as well.

If one compares the top leading brands and the lowest leading brands, it is easy to see the differences. It is this type of calculation which we argue is needed to fully understand a brand in the very complex and often confusing marketplace which exists today. These provide some of the reference numbers which are used in the suggested brand sustainability measure which is described below.

The weakest category and the weakest brand in the 10-year analysis is the children’s cough medicine category. The leading brand in that category is Robitussin which may be a
leading brand in the category but has limited marketplace brand support overall. Only 3.14% of all respondents listed Robitussin as their favorite brand, and the AGR for that brand was −8.29% over the measurement period. As can be seen, all leading brands in this quintile have an SOM of less than 7% of all brand mentions over the 10-year period. Additionally, all brands except Icy/Hot, Gerber Baby Bottles and Bounty Napkins have a negative AGR. The only categories in which no brand preference shows a decline were in the fiber supplements, baby bottles, facial cleansers, color rinses and napkins categories.

Note: In these charts, we should remind the reader that all calculations in this paper are based on consumer responses to the monthly MCS studies. They do not reflect actual measured consumer marketplace sales or commercial SOM results. They are, however, indicative of the purpose for which they are used, that is, to estimate/calculate the development of a brand sustainability measure.

Extending the analysis, Figure 5 illustrates more detail on the top leading brand categories characteristics. There, the category is shown along with the leading brand in that category. In Column 3, the number of brands is shown. The fourth column shows the brand’s NPS. The final column is the average monthly frequency of purchase. Thus, the first line of data in Figure 5 might be read as Clorox is the leading brand in the bleach category. There are 10 measured brands in that category. The average NPS for the 10-year period was 2.03 (a rather low figure in the NPS system).

The same level of data for the lowest leading brand categories characteristics is shown in Figure 6.

A quick comparison of the lowest leading brands (above) with the top leading brands (Figure 5) clearly shows the level of difference between the brands in this analysis. For the most part, the NPS numbers are quite different. The lowest leading brands almost all have an NPS in negative double digits, i.e., cold and flu child Tylenol is 48.24, fiber supplements Metamucil is 39.70 and coloring rinses Clairol is 33.77. Clearly, NPS does differentiate between brands and it does provide a forward-looking view of brand value. That is why we have selected the NPS as the base number in our suggested sustainability measure. It reflects what was discussed earlier as being critical to the future brand growth of individual brands. If current brand users are recommending the brand to others, they would bode well for future growth of the brand.

With that background, we now illustrate how a brand sustainability measure might be created and used in the future.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Leading Brand</th>
<th>Number Comp. of Brands Index</th>
<th>NPS</th>
<th>Monthly Freq.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bleach</td>
<td>Clorox</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0.215</td>
<td>2.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glass Cleaners</td>
<td>Windex</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0.230</td>
<td>2.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Razors</td>
<td>Gillette</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0.140</td>
<td>−13.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aluminum Foils</td>
<td>Reynolds</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0.150</td>
<td>−5.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facial Tissue</td>
<td>Kleenex</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0.120</td>
<td>−5.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dish Detergents</td>
<td>Dawn</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>0.122</td>
<td>4.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toothpaste</td>
<td>Crest</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>0.143</td>
<td>10.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baby Shampoo</td>
<td>John. &amp; John.</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0.123</td>
<td>22.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insect Repellent</td>
<td>OFF</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0.083</td>
<td>−27.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toothbrushes</td>
<td>Oral B</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0.091</td>
<td>−0.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports Drink</td>
<td>Gatorade</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0.054</td>
<td>−33.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laundry Detergent</td>
<td>Tide</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>0.104</td>
<td>15.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food Storage Bags</td>
<td>Ziploc</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0.103</td>
<td>−13.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toilet Tissue</td>
<td>Charmin</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0.077</td>
<td>12.68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5. Top leading brand categories characteristics.
5. Brand sustainability measure

Brand sustainability is demonstrated by the brand’s ability to maintain or improve its marketplace position in relationship to other brands in its category over time. Thus, the AGR becomes a critical measure in terms of brand sustainability. A brand that is showing a decline in AGR in its marketplace position or share in our evaluation system would be losing its sustainability and perhaps on a trajectory to complete elimination at some point in the future.

Brand sustainability can be operationalized as the average growth rate (AGR) of the brand preference as measured over an extended period of time. In this study, the measurement period is for 10 years. While we have used summary statistics in this paper, we are quite capable of drilling down into the data and looking at brand performance on an annual basis. In this analysis, we posit that brands that demonstrate a positive (above zero) brand AGR are healthy and clearly able to hold their marketplace position. Brands that demonstrate a negative brand AGR are losing their marketplace position and hence their sustainability. It is this type of measure that brand managers need to properly plan for and allocate finite corporate resources going into the future.

Of the 73 leading packaged goods brands measured in this analysis, 50, or 68%, have shown a negative AGR over the 10-year period. As can be seen in Figure 7 (below), 11 or 15% of the measured brands had negative AGR in excess of 5% over the study period. Only 23 leading brands showed a positive brand AGR, and only 4 have a positive AGR in excess of 5%. Again, this is reflected in the overall average negative leading brand AGR of $-1.68\%$ as previously discussed. By knowing this type of information, a broader look at brand portfolios is possible for senior management.

Interestingly, brand sustainability, as represented by leading brand share AGR, is unrelated to most of the variables studied here except no preference AGR. That finding greatly simplifies the development and analysis of a brand sustainability approach for the analyst and the brand manager.

Figure 8 shows a correlation of $-0.41$ between the two growth rates, which means that the decline in leading brand share is being taken by an increase in no brand preference. It is
also quite interesting that the competitive problem for the leading brand does not appear to be store brands or other brands, competitors on which many brand managers have focused their attention in the past. That would seem to indicate the need for some new approaches and concepts in terms of brand management going forward.

As shown above, leading brand share is related to leading brand NPS and, of course, inversely related to no brand preference share. No brand preference share is highest when the leading brand NPS is lowest and purchase frequency is also lowest. The leading brand NPS is related to its share and more frequent purchasing (times per month).

Brand sustainability is best explained by a combination of no brand preference AGR and leading brand NPS. Figure 9 shows a multiple regression analysis using both no brand preference AGR ($\beta = 0.446$) and leading brand NPS ($\beta = 0.203$) to predict leading brand AGR.

The growth in no brand preference can be attributed to a number of complex and interrelated factors. Commoditization, for example, may have an impact as consumers increasingly believe that all brands perform equally well. Government controls and quality requirements may be a factor here. Product safety is much less of an issue than it has been in the past. Continual price promotion may be another. When the brand price is continuously manipulated by both the brand owner and the retailer, it is likely the brand

![Figure 7](image_url)  
Figure 7. Average growth rate for leading brands in 73 categories.

![Figure 8](image_url)  
Figure 8. Correlation matrix.
difference can be or is easily confused by the consumer. There are likely a number of other reasons for the growth of no brand preference which should be investigated by brand researchers.

We propose that this analysis shows that brand sustainability is and can be a relevant measure in understanding the brand and brand value in today’s very complex marketplace. It goes far beyond typical measures of brand loyalty and illustrates how the brand competes in an overall brand category, not just with other directly competitive brands but with the growing importance of no brand preference.

6. Conclusions and next steps

In this study, a new concept, that of brand sustainability, has been developed and presented. Drawing on an extensive consumer reported, online data set (well over 1,000,000 responses) in a broad range of consumer product categories sold in food stores, we have been able to track and measure consumer brand preference using a form of the well-accepted NPS approach. We propose that this new technique, the calculation and understanding a brand sustainability score, can be a vital element for the proper measurement and management of brand value going forward. Further, we have demonstrated that the primary concern of the brand manager going forward is better focused on the growth of category no brand preference much more so than directly competitive brands or even private label and store brands. This is a situation that many brand managers have likely suspected but, until this point, had no relevant evidence.

What we believe this study and analysis does is identify a set of new research initiatives that should be taken on by both academicians and practitioners. Some of the areas we believe need to be considered in future research are:

(1) The concept of brand sustainability has been developed and demonstrated. For it to be accepted and included in the overall development of brands and branding, more studies are needed. We plan an aggressive approach to the subject and urge others to join us in either enhancing or debunking the approach. Clearly, something must be developed to better enable brand managers to determine which brands to support and which have potential problems. We have proposed brand sustainability. Are there others or better ones?
What we have not demonstrated in this analysis is why brand sustainability is declining and what may be causing those declines. The CMS dataset has identified a number of potential culprits. We urge other researchers to acquire and use that data to help determine why this situation is occurring.

In this study, we found that the NPS for retail stores was higher than that of manufacturer brands. If this is true, and it seems to be in this dataset, additional research should be undertaken to determine why and how this shift in consumer preference has occurred and how brands might work more closely with Retailers to find cooperatively beneficial solutions to overcome the growing no brand preference in many product categories.

From this data, it appears that brand management should be focusing their efforts on creating better brand differentiation between the brand and a commodity product. The real enemy of brands seems to be a lack of consumer belief that brands offer any differentiating value. If that is the case, the question should be a rethinking of what really constitutes brand value in today’s marketplace. Clearly, the strategies and approaches being used today are not working. What can and should be done? In short, do we need to rethink the entire concept of brands in consumer product categories?

A seemingly hidden area of brand viability is that of the brand category. In other words, some categories generate greater consumer interest and concern than others. For example, in our study, the bleach category, Clorox, had the greatest leading brand share, while other categories such as dinner entrees and facial cleaners lagged far behind. Is it possible that brands are more important to consumers in some categories than in others? In other words, will brand investments generate greater returns based on the product category than others? This is an interesting finding and could provide some interesting results for brand managers.

Is the major change in marketing communication forms creating some of the changes identified in this study? Are social media changing how consumers learn about and build preference for brands? Is the decline of consumer usage of mass media contributing to the decline of brand preference and the growth of no brand preference?

Finally, is it possible that brands have served their purpose as a mass market differentiator and that the growth of the individualized market means that brands will have less value in the future? This is probably the major overriding question that this preliminary study raises. And that may be the most important research question of all.

Note
1. Email: mblock@blockres.com

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References


**Appendix A: 16 store product categories**

- Household cleaning products
- Laundry detergent/fabric care products
- Personal care and hygiene products
- Hair care products
- Oral and personal cleansing products
- Summertime products
- Skin care and cosmetic products
- Snack food products
- Baby-related products
- Toys/games products
- Baby equipment
- Diapering products
- Frozen foods
- Food storage bags, wraps and plastic containers
- Nonprescription drug products

*a Partial data.*
Appendix B: 73 product categories with brand information (total of 131 categories)

- Air freshener
- Bathroom cleaners
- Dish detergents
- Dishwasher detergent
- Glass cleaners
- Paper towels
- Bleach
- Fabric softener
- Laundry detergent
- Stain remover
- Antiperspirant
- Facial tissues
- Razors
- Shampoo
- Shaving cream
- Toilet tissue
- Coloring/rinsers
- Conditioner
- Hair spray
- Mousse/styling gel
- Shampoo
- Mouth wash and dental rinse
- Tooth brushes
- Toothpaste
- Bath soap
- Antibacterial hand sanitizer
- Bottled water/flavored water
- Carbonated beverages
- Drink mixes
- Energy drinks
- Sports drink
- Insect repellant
- Sun tan lotion
- Antibacterial soap
- Body wash
- Facial cleansers
- Hand moisturizer

- Cosmetic line
- Breakfast cereal
- Breakfast bars
- Candy
- Ice cream/frozen yogurt
- Popcorn
- Salty snacks
- Baby diapers
- Baby bottles
- Baby formula
- Baby food
- Baby shampoo
- Baby wipes and towelettes
- Toddler training pants
- Chicken and turkey
- Dinner entrees
- Fish and seafood
- Ice cream and frozen yogurt
- Pizza
- Vegetables
- Aluminum foils
- Disposable containers
- Food storage bags
- Napkins
- Nondisposable containers
- Paper plates
- Plastic wraps
- Antacids
- Cough medicine – adult
- Cough medicine – children
- Cold and flu medications – adults
- Cold and flu medications – children
- Fiber supplements or laxatives
- Pain relievers – pills or capsules
- Pain relievers – creams/ointments/patches
- Sinus or allergy medications
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