
Forget reputation.
Your brand
needs character. →

The State of Brands

Modern brands aren't static or monolithic. They're fluid. They interact, evolve and adapt to changing contexts. Crucially, they allow consumers to take ownership.

At VSA Partners, we've always believed that a brand is a critical business asset to be strategically developed and managed. It's not just a logo, tagline or visual identity, but a set of interlinked decisions about what promises to make to which stakeholders, and how to deliver on those promises in every aspect of performance, behavior and communication.

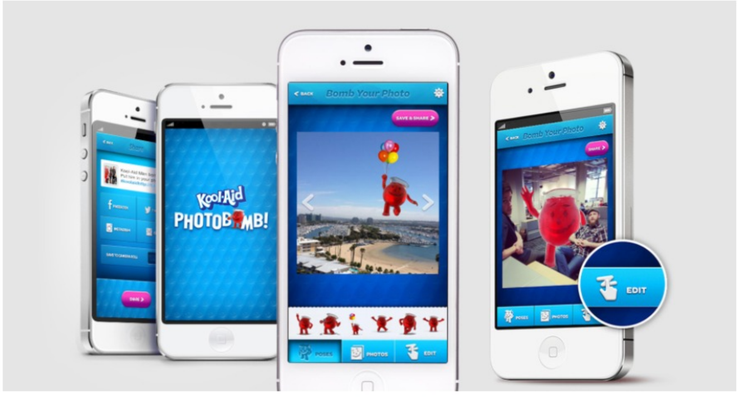
Sound complex? It is. Especially today, in a digital world where roles, relationships and conversations are continually changing. These days, every brand is expected to be:

Distributed

Brands today live through millions of small touches and lightweight interactions, mediated by employees and other brand ambassadors. Content flows seamlessly into social media, and visual elements like logos can easily be located, downloaded and manipulated by virtually anyone.

Shared

Consumers can and will incorporate branded content into their own personal narratives. Not only is this allowed by brand owners and managers—it's actively encouraged, with the understanding that branded "tribes" wield enormous influence.



1/3 Kool-Aid's commitment to being **distributed** and **shared** is seen in the entertaining and shareable ways the brand reaches moms and their kids—like the Kool-Aid Photobomb app, which allows people to insert the Kool-Aid Man directly into their own family pictures.

Combined

Modern brands often form partnerships with like-minded or complementary brands to create new experiences for consumers. Deeply understanding and reflecting a brand's "soul" is essential in these kinds of collaborative efforts.

Screened

Consumers expect that brands will show up appropriately for them in a variety of situations—from the palm of their hand, to the side of a building, to a jumbotron in a stadium outfield—calibrated effortlessly to the types of interactions each context requires.

So here's the real question for modern brands: which elements and attributes must be able to change over time, and which must *never* change? What are the enduring, essential truths of the brand?

VSA's system of brand thinking has been inspired, shaped and informed over years of work with big, global brands like IBM, Harley-Davidson, AB InBev and Nike. But the principles behind our work apply equally to brands of all sizes, in all categories, anywhere and everywhere they live.

It comes down to understanding and codifying four key dimensions of a brand and the enduring idea at the heart of it. We call this our Brand Character Model.

THE VSA BRAND CHARACTER MODEL →

LET'S TALK:

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Heather Torreggiani,
Cheif Marketing Officer

The VSA Brand Character Model

1/ Who you serve

Who is using your brand today? What benefits are being derived? What needs are being met or jobs being done? What other consumers could be more valuable if you were able to meet different needs?

In some categories, such as packaged goods, there is often a quantitative research component to identifying the high-value consumer. In other categories, we mine existing research or data sets, or parse through institutional knowledge, to define who we serve in the most compelling way. In any event, our ultimate goals are to build a "user case" for the people at the center of your brand, to create an empathetic understanding for their lives and to tell their stories in such a way that brand stewardship emerges naturally and intuitively.



2/ The role you play

Why does the brand exist? What is its contribution to the world? What unique impact does it have on people's lives?

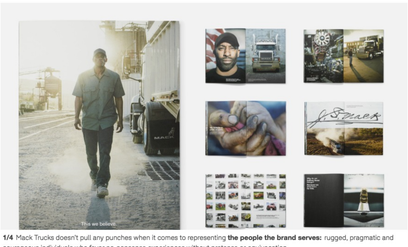
Companies and brands devote a lot of time to considering their purposes—and for good reason, as a clear and emotionally resonant purpose can be a powerful motivator among internal and external audiences. In our view, though, having a purpose is only one aspect of designing a brand experience, and companies that rest solely on purpose miss opportunities to further cement the brand's relationships with stakeholders. People don't just want to know what a brand "stands for"; they're looking for what it means to them.

3/ How you deliver

What activities and ways of working define your role in the world? What do you do or deliver that is worth paying for?

Getting to a clear and differentiating brand promise is the transitional step that enables modern brands to succeed in crowded marketplaces. This requires a clear-eyed examination of where they can and can't profitably deliver to stakeholders.

It's not just about functional benefits. Today's successful brands deliver across the full spectrum of functional, emotional, transformational and even transcendent benefits, and there is evidence that brands that "play all the notes" in harmony are seen as more useful and valuable than those that focus on only one benefit.



1/4 Mack Trucks doesn't pull any punches when it comes to representing **the people the brand serves:** rugged, pragmatic and courageous individuals who favor no-nonsense experiences without pretense or equivocation.

4/ How you are experienced

In today's complex business and consumer ecosystems, it's important to identify the key moments where a brand matters most. It's impossible to be everywhere all the time, so we must choose wisely. Where should you invest? Where must you win?

In the case of a consumer good, the battleground is often a retail store shelf, and packaging carries a disproportionate share of the brand experience. For a technology brand, the first encounter with a user experience is more critical. For a hotel, the moment of truth may be an interaction with a front desk employee or the ability to easily check in online in advance.

To understand the inflection points where brand experience is most critical, we often use techniques like journey maps to identify the inroads and off-ramps to a brand relationship. This allows greater investment in aspects of brand experience that matter most.

What is the brand's ultimate reason for being? What is the essential impact on people's lives? When it comes to an enduring idea, we're looking for an anchor that will stand the test of time.

5/ Your enduring idea

This is the truth at the center of the brand, the core idea that unites all other dimensions of the brand character.

What is the brand's ultimate reason for being? What is the essential impact on people's lives? What is the single most important insight or objective behind the brand?

When it comes to an enduring idea, we're looking for an anchor that will stand the test of time—a true north in the form of a single word or phrase. The clearer and more concise, the better: the point should be as sharp as possible, with no room for alternate interpretations.

It should go without saying that none of this is meant for the eyes of consumers or other stakeholders. It's strictly a tool for those individuals charged with shaping and communicating a brand. When the model is used effectively, however, the different dimensions can be seen clearly in the ways the brand comes to life.

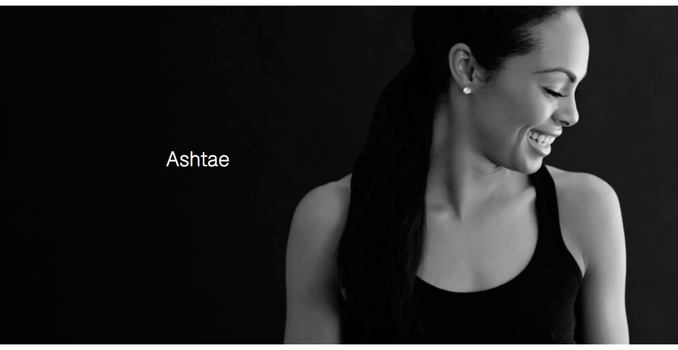
THE MODEL IN ACTION →

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The Model in Action



On CNBC's *The Profit*, VSA worked with Marcus Lemonis and Ashtae's senior management team to design a new brand expression. While the process was accelerated for television, many of the same principles were applied behind the scenes.

Who we serve

While Ashtae's products are made for consumers, the brand's initial focus was on owners and operators of independent salons in tight-knit communities. These are small-business people with big dreams who frequently struggle to convert their business aspirations into reality.

The role we play

Ashtae provides far more than a quality product; we provide the insight and guidance to run a thriving, purpose-driven business.

How we deliver

As a product, Ashtae delivers the benefit of strong, healthy hair through formulas engineered specifically for ethnic hair types and the adventurous styling that many women of color apply to achieve the look they want. As a brand, the delivery includes the training, support and inspiration that salon owners need to run their businesses.

How we are experienced

Ashtae is first encountered in the salon environment, often through the use and recommendation of the stylist. At this point, the consumer may not even be aware that Ashtae is being used, so a brand-facilitated conversation between stylist and customer is essential. Later, the brand is experienced in the private setting of the home, where it must be an affirmation that consumers are doing their best to be healthy and strong.

Our enduring idea

Freedom of identity.









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