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1. Stakeholder Engagement

1.1. The Power of Customer-Centric Brand Storytelling

Is the consumer the hero of the brand story?

Within any story, a hero never starts out as a triumphant character. Instead, the story begins with challenges and drama that confront an ordinary character, taking them on a journey toward victory, ultimately transforming them into the hero (Salva, 2025). Miri Rodriguez states in her book *Brand Storytelling: Put Customers at the Heart of Your Brand Story* that, as soon as a character manages to evoke immeasurable emotions within a story, that character unquestionably becomes the hero (Rodriguez, 2023).

In Dove's *Dove Selfie | Redefining Beauty One Photo At A Time* campaign (Dove US, 2014), the consumer is definitely the hero of the brand story. The characters in this campaign encounter significant self-image issues, taking the viewer on an emotional journey toward self-love and self-acceptance. Referring to the customer, The Umbrella Workshop explains: "By understanding their quests, positioning your brand as their guide, highlighting their transformation, and inviting them into the narrative, you can craft a powerful and resonant brand story where your audience truly feels like the hero" (The Umbrella Workshop, 2025).

The viewer can relate to the concerns that these mothers and their daughters face, as poor self-image is a universal struggle (Dove, 2016). The honesty of the characters creates vulnerability when they publicly discuss their flaws with the viewer, making it an authentic brand story that resonates with the consumer. Dove does not position itself as the solution to redefining beauty; instead, it inspires young girls and women to discover true beauty themselves.

Why is customer-centricity key?

In his book, *Building a Story Brand*, Donald Miller clearly states that the primary principle of his theory is based on the fact that the customer should be the hero, not the brand (Miller, 2017). He adds that by defining a product or service a customer desires, a brand potentially becomes the direction towards which a customer will lean. By consistently establishing itself as a trustworthy brand, a company is more likely to engage customers (Miller, 2017). Companies focusing on a customer-centric approach are 60% more profitable, according to a study done by Deloitte Research (Deloitte Digital, n.d.).

Consumers, especially younger generations, support brands that add value to societal good. They consciously make buying decisions based on what brands stand for and how they drive activism (Rodriguez, 2023). Furthermore, consumers want to engage with brands that are open about their core values and are easily approachable on a more personal, friendlier level (Rodriguez, 2023).

A customer-centric brand will not only see revenue growth and increased market share but will also gain customer loyalty, satisfaction, and significant trust (Meester, 2023).

1.2. An Emotional Journey

How Dove creates emotional connections

The *Dove Selfie | Redefining Beauty One Photo At A Time* campaign (Dove US, 2014) illustrates honest conversations between mothers and daughters, and how they perceive their physical appearance. The ability to balance the opening conversations between serious and light-hearted appeals to various personality types, establishing an immediate emotional connection between Dove and consumers. As the story develops, the viewer is introduced to an array of characters, effectively creating diversity that entices the audience.

Vulnerability

For a consumer to relate to a brand story, the brand must expose itself in an emotional and humane manner that opens a connecting gateway between them and the consumer. When a brand portrays empathy in its storytelling, the consumer is more likely to engage with it because the brand appears more relatable and human. This compassionate message told through its brand story falls on ears that crave an emotional connection as opposed to just a hard-selling product story (Rodriguez, 2023).

Remarkable about this campaign is the vulnerability of the characters and how Dove managed to portray an emotional message without coming across as weak. Simply by showcasing real women and young girls sharing their self-image inner conflicts, Dove effectively embraces vulnerability, making the campaign relatable to numerous audiences.

The sincere conversations between the girls and their mothers while taking selfies reveal their respect for one another, especially since they have opposing opinions about their physical appearance. This adds to the vulnerability of the campaign by depicting honest human behaviour.

Empathy

“Empathy is a powerful tool for gaining richer insight into your customer’s experience at every step in their value chain,” explains Thomson Dawson in his article *Brand Building Requires Empathy For The Customer* (Dawson, n.d.). For a brand to truly empathise with its customers, it needs to distance itself from the term “business” and instead become “human” to its consumers (Rodriguez, 2023). It drives admiration and loyalty when a brand understands the consumer’s desires and emotional needs, inevitably building a reassuring bond that is based on trust and validation (Friederichsen, n.d.).

The women and girls build a solid empathy foundation in the Dove Selfie Campaign by portraying themselves as individuals with a universal struggle: a lack of self-esteem. Immediately, the viewer becomes involved on a personal level since they can relate to a human and not just a brand. Dove’s message of sympathetic awareness of women’s self-esteem is clear, and in return, the viewer empathises with these girls and their mothers since there is a communal consciousness when it comes to inner-conflict surrounding the concept of real beauty.

Dove's "Isn't it time to redefine beauty?" question statement resonates with females globally, and the brand successfully manages to make the consumer feel heard and valued. Dove becomes a relatable entity that depicts the sentiment of the consumer, meeting their emotional needs.

Inclusion

When crafting a brand story, it is not only crucial to remain authentic, but a brand also needs to practise inclusivity through its storytelling (Adobe Express, 2024). Representing diversity within a consumer community creates a sense of belonging and enables a brand to connect with various distinctive customers through one story (Adobe Express, 2024).

The different archetypes featured in the Dove Selfie Campaign are noteworthy, and Dove successfully included uniquely individual girls who speak to various personality types. Even though the mothers all share age as their personal struggle, the interaction with their daughters still remains distinctive, making the included personas a wider variety.

Another success for Dove is the way in which it included different races within the campaign. Even though it is evident that these girls attend the same school, the diverse cultures are significant. Immediately, the campaign becomes relevant to viewers globally and not just within the Monument Mountain Regional High School community.

1.3. Brand Advocacy

What is brand advocacy?

When an individual promotes a brand without monetary compensation, they automatically become an advocate for that brand (Haiilo, 2024). Brand advocacy amplifies brand awareness, giving a brand prominence and visibility within larger circles of prospective customers (Haiilo, 2024). The benefits of positive brand advocacy add an innumerable increase in brand value and company revenue (Haiilo, 2024).

Did the Dove Real Beauty campaign contribute to brand advocacy?

In Carol Phillips' article *How To Identify A Brand-Building Winner* (n.d.), she states that Dove's branding team was reluctant to share its Real Beauty campaign since it did not market a specific product or service, and its initial budget was not significant (Phillips, n.d.). Following the campaign's launch, consumers and influencers alike welcomed the brand's message, and the Real Beauty campaign sparked global conversations. Phillips (n.d.) adds statistics to her article and reveals that the Real Beauty PR campaign gained \$21 million in free publicity (Phillips, n.d.). Three years after the launch of the campaign, Dove's brand value gained \$1.2 billion (Phillips, n.d.). Considering these statistics, it is clear that Dove's Real Beauty campaign has made a significant contribution to brand advocacy.

Unilever employees

Dove (2025) posted a video on their LinkedIn page stating that its Self-Esteem Project, walking hand-in-hand with the Real Beauty campaign, has reached more than 150 countries, entering the minds of 20 million young people (Dove, 2025). President Unilever USA and CEO Personal Care North America, Herrish Pate (2025), comments that he is proud of the growth and inspiration the project delivers. Amongst others, Guada Mora (2025), Dove Global Head of Engagement, shared the video saying: “I am very proud to work in a brand that invest in empowering little and young girls.”

Dove customers

As valuable brand advocates, Dove’s customers play a pivotal role in amplifying Dove’s brand awareness. Shayaike Hassan (2024) writes in his article, *Dove’s “Real Beauty” Campaign: Authenticity Over Perfection* (Hassan, 2024), that according to Hootsuite’s report in 2008, Dove’s Real Beauty campaign gained 700% in social media engagement after the brand introduced the RealBeauty hashtag. Hassan (2024) adds that since the launch of the campaign, 71% of women’s feelings about Dove have increased positively, and that the survey also indicated a 52% increased chance to purchase Dove products (Hassan, 2024). These statistics indicate that, as brand advocates, customers make a significant impact on Dove’s brand.

2. Brand Equity

2.1. Dove's Brand Story

The brand mission/purpose

A brand's mission statement defines its existence and what it stands for. It is a manifestation of its core purpose and the value it aims to add to its consumers' lives (Rodriguez, 2023). "We're on a mission," states Dove on their website's home page, "We're dismantling toxic beauty standards and creating a truly inclusive vision of beauty," (Dove, n.d.).

Rodriguez strongly advises that, in brand storytelling, a brand's fundamental values and primary purpose must be portrayed clearly to create an emotional connection with its customers so its story can spark interest and provoke interaction (Rodriguez, 2023).

Dove's mission and purpose within the *Dove Selfie | Redefining Beauty One Photo At A Time* campaign (Dove US, 2014) are visibly illustrated, and it is evident that the story resonated with its consumers. Since the launch of the Dove Selfie Campaign eleven years ago, the video has been watched more than 6.8 million times and sparked 124 comments, of which the majority applaud Dove on their mission (Dove US, 2014).

Supported by its mission statement, Dove's message comes across clearly as it questions the viewer, "Isn't it time to redefine beauty?" shortly after introducing the characters, stating their self-esteem issues. The viewer embarks on a journey of self-discovery as the characters come to realise what the true meaning of beauty is, which, in essence, is what Dove stands for.

The brand promise

A brand's promise is the foundation of the relationship it builds with its customers. By consistently delivering what a brand stands for, a brand builds trust and loyalty between itself and its current and prospective consumers (Young Entrepreneur Council, 2023). Dove vows to make an impact on consumers' self-esteem and their perception of beauty. "Our mission is to ensure that the next generation grows up enjoying a positive relationship with the way they look – helping young people raise their self-esteem and realise their full potential," explains Dove on its website's *Dove Self Esteem Project* mission page (Dove, n.d.).

The Dove Selfie Campaign delivers Dove's promise by showing the girls and their mothers that the power to "redefine beauty" is in their hands. It is noteworthy how the characters developed from being insecure to becoming more confident about their appearances. This is evident in the discussions the mothers and daughters have early in the campaign, where they point out the negative aspects of themselves, whereas in the end, they highlight and embrace their positive features.

The brand positioning

The target market

The *Dove Selfie | Redefining Beauty One Photo At A Time* campaign (Dove US, 2014) is targeted at women and young girls, as seen in the introduction of the video. Mothers and daughters are having open conversations about how they perceive themselves and each other's physical features, creating a solid foundation for who the characters are and who the campaign is aimed at.

From the discussions in the introduction of the campaign, the viewer is presented with a concrete theme that, if it resonates with them, will keep their attention. The Dove Global Beauty and Confidence Report (Dove, n.d.) presents its audience with disconcerting statistics on how girls and women withdraw themselves if they are unhappy with their appearance. These statistics support the theme of the Dove Selfie Campaign and make the campaign relevant to its target market.

The viewer is introduced to girls attending Monument Mountain Regional High School, Massachusetts, United States. Even though the story is set in a geographically specific location, the message extends beyond the geographic borders of the campaign's physical location. Dove's mission statement includes women and girls globally (Dove, n.d.), and the campaign supports Dove's goal.

As the girls within the campaign are called together, the viewer is introduced to another character addressing the primary pain point of Dove's purpose: "You have the power to change and redefine what beauty is." During the character's conversation, she states that digital devices are a powerful tool readily available, making it evident that the campaign is targeted at the digital age.

The brand benefits

Even though the Dove Selfie Campaign is not promoting a Dove product that promises to be beneficial, the emotional benefits gained from the campaign are significant. "I really like that someone is starting to do something about the social pressure on women to look beautiful", comments a YouTube user on the campaign (Dove US, 2014). Looking at the impact the selfie exhibition had on these mothers and their daughters, it is clear that the emotional benefits consumers gain from this campaign are invaluable.

The point of difference/USP

"Any time a Dove commercial comes on in the videos, I NEVER skip. It's always so worth watching!" comments another YouTube user on the campaign (Dove US, 2014). Dove's unique selling point is aiming its message at its well-researched target market (Dove, n.d.), addressing concerns that resonate with its consumers. The creative way in which Dove approached the Dove Selfie Campaign, from introducing everyday characters, addressing a heartfelt pain point, and challenging the characters, to creating a fun exhibition that drastically impacts the characters' initial opinions about themselves, manifests a unique global message.

The reason to believe

Dove's brand promise to always keep beauty real and celebrate it in all its uniqueness (Dove, n.d.) is evident in the Dove Selfie Campaign, which features mothers and daughters from diverse cultural backgrounds. The campaign shows real women and girls experiencing inner conflict that resonates with Dove's customers, and it presents its audience with yet another powerful message: "The power is in your hands. Redefine beauty." This campaign fundamentally supports Dove's promise that has been circulating the media for more than 20 years. Pau Bartoli (2024), Dove's Masterbrand Director, says in a Unilever article: "Dove's continued growth is a testament to the brand's dedication to championing real beauty and the enduring connection that it has built with consumers around the world" (Unilever, 2024). This concludes Dove's brand promise and how it delivers on its promise, giving their customers a reason to believe that Dove stays true to its consumers.

Dove's brand positioning statement

Looking at Dove's mission statement and brand promise (Dove, n.d.), it is remarkable how the brand has positioned itself within global consumerism. When applying its brand positioning statement to the Dove Selfie Campaign, the core message of the brand is well communicated and reinforces how Dove positions itself. For women and young girls who need to feel comfortable and accepted in their own skin, Dove is more than a beauty product. Dove is a reinforcement for building self-esteem because it supports real beauty and aims to make a global impact on how beauty is perceived.

2.2. Dove's Brand Equity

What is brand equity?

Brand equity is the constructive value and fulfillment of promises a brand delivers to the consumer's experience after brand recognition has been established (Marketing Evolution, 2022). A consumer's perception of a brand is influenced by how a brand situates itself in the mind of the consumer by building a prestigious reputation through value-added service and quality products, creating an increased level of brand equity (Qualtrics XM, 2023). In essence, brand equity enhances customer loyalty, resulting in increased sales and profit margins (Marketing Evolution, 2022).

How Dove built brand equity

Creating a unique brand strategy that resonates with consumers requires attention to brand awareness, brand loyalty, perceived quality, and brand associations, which will evidently result in higher brand equity (Qualtrics XM, n.d.). Dove successfully built brand equity through the *Dove Selfie | Redefining Beauty One Photo At A Time* campaign (Dove US, 2014) by paying close attention to these components.

Brand awareness

Brand awareness is the foundation of a consumer's buying decisions. It is the way in which a consumer perceives a brand based on its physical appearance, messaging, and their customer experience (Qualtrics XM, 2023). By improving a brand's persona through emotional connection and ethical values, a brand becomes more human, making it easier for consumers to relate to (Schmidt, 2020). When a brand has a strong persona, brand awareness will increase, and consumers will be more likely to consider a brand's product or service.

Even though the first five seconds of the campaign do not immediately portray Dove's identity, the *Selfie* text aligns itself with Dove's brand identity. The iconic white background with its recognisable typeface introduces the viewer to another journey compiled by Dove. Following the conversations between the mothers and their daughters, Dove's renowned question statement "Isn't it time to redefine beauty?" appears, adding further value and awareness to its brand. The campaign is concluded with Dove's prominent logo and an inspiring call-to-action, positioning the brand in the familiar space of its Real Beauty campaigns.

Brand loyalty

Brand loyalty is when a consumer is dedicated and emotionally attached to a brand because the brand speaks in a tone that resonates with them, and fulfills their expectations and needs (Kekes-Szabo, n.d.). When a consumer becomes loyal to a brand, a secure relationship is formed, and the product or service price of a competing brand becomes irrelevant. This relationship will ensure brand engagement and advocacy, resulting in an enhanced brand reputation (Kekes-Szabo, n.d.).

The *Dove Selfie | Redefining Beauty One Photo At A Time* campaign (Dove US, 2014) has gained 6.8 million views since it was published 11 years ago. A longer version of the campaign, *Redefining Beauty: A Selfie Story With Dove* (Dove US, 2014), also shared by Dove US in 2014, has gained a further 1.6 million views. This is foundational proof that Dove's customers actively engaged with the brand. "THIS is how you show people that beauty comes in all forms! Nice work, Dove, I'm crying right now because this is... this is just amazing," comments a viewer on the YouTube campaign. The emotional way in which consumers interact with Dove's Selfie videos is a clear indication of the brand loyalty value Dove has gained from this specific campaign.

Perceived quality

Mark Di Somma (n.d.) explains in his article, *Brand Perceptions: Perceived Quality Rules The Day*, that "perceived quality is defined as a measure of belief" (Somma, n.d.). How a brand delivers a service or a product based on quality and expectation delivery is its perceived quality as considered by the consumer (Somma, n.d.).

Dove's perceived quality comes across as exceptional when considering its brand value statistics. Dove's brand value gained \$1.2 billion in the first three years after the Real Beauty campaign was launched (Phillips, n.d.). The Dove Selfie Campaign was well-received, and comments from the video's viewers support the brand's perceived quality. "I applaud Dove for creating a campaign to broaden the definition of beauty. THANK

YOU!", says user FESTIVE1000. Another noteworthy comment to highlight is from Bushdid119: "Dove you are awesome! Thank you for being realistic, women everywhere appreciate it!" Dove's Selfie Campaign significantly enhanced the brand's perceived quality.

Brand associations

The way a consumer remembers a brand, the elements they associate with a brand, and the thoughts triggered when interacting with it all contribute to the definition of brand association (Mason, 2024). Positive brand association is crucial since it creates brand awareness and brand loyalty, resulting in returning customers who prefer the brand to its competitors (Mason, 2024). There are different types of associations a consumer makes with a brand, including the product itself, its benefits, and its personality. The visual appearance and the values of a brand also contribute to brand association (Mason, 2024).

Considering the *Dove Selfie | Redefining Beauty One Photo At A Time* campaign (Dove US, 2014), brand association comes across through numerous elements. The familiar emotional benefits consumers gain from this campaign are significant, and this can be seen in the comments left by consumers. A viewer stated that Dove's campaign was an eye-opener to them and that it taught them a lesson of self-appreciation. Dove's personality is strongly projected within this campaign, as it triggers the same thoughts and emotions its entire Real Beauty campaign does. Furthermore, the familiarity of the Dove brand is clearly portrayed by the consistent application of its brand identity.

3. Strategic Considerations

3.1. An ethical consideration for Dove

Rodriguez (2023) explains that ethics in marketing need to be an accurate correlation between a brand's values and its brand story (Rodriguez, 2023). When Dove manifested its Real Beauty pledge in 2004, the brand vowed to feature undistorted, no AI-generated, and no professional models to represent its brand. Dove also pledged to feature diversity in its purest form (Dove, n.d.). Considering the brand's values, Dove's major challenge with the *Dove Selfie | Redefining Beauty One Photo At A Time* campaign (Dove US, 2014) was to showcase these values, especially by featuring real women and girls in an undistorted and digitally unedited way.

How this ethical consideration affected the brand story

In order for Dove to commit to its brand values, the brand had to be very selective when it came to the cast of the campaign. Dove's decision to feature real girls from Monument Mountain Regional High School was a well-thought-out strategy to stay committed to its pledge. The concept behind the selfie exhibition challenge is on point with Dove's ethical decision to showcase real girls and to encourage these girls to showcase themselves in an unedited way, adding further value to the brand's mission. The campaign became a story within a story, both portraying the same ethical values. A brand story needs to foster trust with its audience (Rodriguez, 2023), and the Dove Selfie Campaign successfully achieved this goal by looking at the response in which it was received.

3.2. Dove's Real Beauty Communication

Reputable online articles

The *Dove Selfie | Redefining Beauty One Photo At A Time* campaign (Dove US, 2014) was featured in numerous online articles, including news platforms like Business Insider, ABC News, The Drum, and Elle. These articles add valuable publicity for Dove's brand message and link back to the campaign, generating more views and interaction.

ABC News (2014) reported that, according to Dove, the aim of the campaign was for women to redefine how they perceive beauty (ABC News, 2014). Jennifer Faull (2014), Deputy Editor for The Drum, explains how Dove motivates women globally to revisit the way they see themselves and encourages them to share their natural beauty on social media platforms (Faull, 2014). Elle (2014) also published an article about the groundbreaking campaign, saying how uplifting it is to see these girls' positive self-discovery (Matthews, 2014).

Social media

Published on YouTube on 20 January 2014, the *Dove Selfie | Redefining Beauty One Photo At A Time* campaign (Dove US, 2014) had the world of social media abuzz. With 6.8 million views to date, the campaign has since gained further social media shares through various platforms.

Girls Inc. of Hamblen County (2023) shared the campaign video on Facebook saying how it inspired them to host a similar exhibition (Girls Inc. of Hamblen County, 2024). Kate Moretti (2014) shared an unedited selfie crediting Dove's Selfie Campaign's challenge (Moretti, 2014), and her followers commented with photos of themselves, joining in on the movement.

Blog posts

Global bloggers shared their feelings about how the Dove Selfie Campaign impacted them as individuals, adding value to the campaign's reach.

Breakfast with Audrey (n.d.) shares the campaign and says: "Perhaps the traditional perception of beauty needs to be challenged for our own mental health and wellbeing" (Breakfast with Audrey, n.d.). *So About What I Said* author, Melissa Blake, was born with Freeman-Sheldon Syndrome and covers topics about disabilities, lifestyle, and relationships. On 27 January 2014, she published *Let's Try: Take an honest selfie* (Blake, 2014), inspired by Dove's Selfie Campaign. In the post, she encourages her readers to share their honest selfies with her, and sparked significant interest.

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