Branding: Building Meaning, Creating Value, Inspiring Trust

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IISWBM

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1 Introduction

This report summarizes a seminar session on branding, covering how brands are built, why they matter, and how they influence buying behaviour. Led by Shuvadeep Nag, Partner at RK Swamy Limited, the discussion moved through foundational questions — what a brand actually is, whether brands are even necessary — before working through the psychological, cultural, and commercial mechanics that make branding effective. The session used an argumentative format (“disagree till we agree”), encouraging participants to test different schools of thought on brand identity rather than accept a single textbook definition.
Branding was framed as an exercise in building meaning, creating value, and inspiring trust — three outcomes that go beyond a logo or a tagline and speak to the deeper relationship a brand builds with the people who buy into it.

2 Objectives

- To arrive at a working definition of a “brand” and examine why brands exist at all, beyond simply naming a product.
- To explore different schools of thought on branding and how they lead to different ways of drafting a brand strategy.
- To understand the human motivations and needs that brands tap into, and how these translate into brand associations.
- To examine purpose-led branding, including how ideologies, institutions, and even armies have used branding and narrative to build deep, lasting loyalty.
- To understand brand recall, brand trust, and customer lifetime value, and how these differ from short-term hype.

3 Observations and What We Learnt

What Is a Brand?

The session opened with a foundational question that was left deliberately unresolved: what is a brand, and do we really need brands at all? Different schools of thought approach this differently, translating into different practical approaches to drafting and building a brand. A key definition that emerged was that a brand is an identity — closely tied to reputation and image, built from the associations that people attach to an entity or a label over time. In this sense, a brand is a repository of meanings and associations accumulated over time, rather than a fixed, one-time creation. The best brands survive stringent boundaries — holding up under scrutiny, competition, and changing circumstances.

The session also introduced the idea of "escape velocity" for brands — the notion that a brand needs to build enough momentum, trust, and recognition to break free of being just another player in its category and become a category-defining name in its own right.

> **IN THEIR WORDS**
>
> *"A brand is a repository of meanings and associations — not a fixed, one-time creation."*

Brand Recall, Hype, Trust, and Customer Loyalty

A key theme was the distinction between short-term hype and long-term brand relevance. Brand recall was linked to what was described as retinal memory — the idea that strong branding triggers a neural response through emotion, not just recognition of a logo or name. Hype can drive short-term attention without building the deeper trust that sustains a brand over time.

A provocative point raised was that, strictly speaking, no loyal customer exists in a pure sense — customers only actively think about brands at the moment they need to buy something. What looks like loyalty is, in practice, a brand successfully fulfilling a fundamental human motivation and being top-of-mind at the point of need.

Differentiation and the Unique Selling Proposition (USP)

Products need a unique factor to be chosen over alternatives. The Unique Selling Proposition (USP) — a distinct benefit that makes a product better than competitors — was discussed as a foundational, though well-worn, marketing concept. Differentiation was framed broadly as making a product look and feel better than similar offerings from competitors through functional, emotional, or narrative advantages.

4 Key Takeaways

01 **Brand as identity:** A repository of meanings and associations built over time, not a one-time creation such as a logo or name.	**02** **Escape velocity:** The strongest brands survive stringent scrutiny and reach a point where they define their category.
03 **Category before brand:** Consumers buy a category first and then choose a brand within it.	**04** **Human needs drive branding:** Effective branding connects to deep motivations — security, belonging, freedom, respect, and more.
05 **Purpose is powerful:** Purpose-led branding, tied to belief and identity, can create enduring loyalty, as seen in ideologies and institutions.	**06** **Polarisation can work:** A clear, polarising stance is often more memorable than trying to please everyone.
07 **Aconsistent brand world:** A consistent, multidimensional brand world strengthens recognition and recall.	**08** **Trust over loyalty:** What sustains a brand relationship is trust, consistency, and perceived security — not strict loyalty.
09 **Lifetime value over convenience:** Brands ultimately monetise customer lifetime value; convenience alone doesn't always decide a purchase.	**10** **Differentiation remains essential:** A clear, differentiated USP remains essential, even as a long-standing idea that must be refreshed.

5 Conclusion

The session offered a layered view of branding — moving from first principles (what is a brand, why do brands exist) through to the psychological and commercial mechanics that make branding work in practice. The recurring thread was that branding is not a surface-level exercise in visual identity, but a long-term process of building meaning, earning trust, and consistently fulfilling the deeper motivations that drive human decision-making. Purpose, narrative, and calculated polarization emerged as powerful tools, but they were repeatedly anchored back to the fundamental discipline of satisfying customer needs and maintaining a clear, differentiated brand promise.

Overall, the discussion reinforced that successful brands earn their place not through a single campaign or moment of hype, but by consistently showing up for customers across categories and over time — turning a product or an idea into something people trust, recall instinctively, and choose to return to, again and again.

> ***"A brand earns its long-term position not through one moment of hype, but through repeated and meaningful experiences that make people recognise, trust, and choose it over time."***

Report compiled from the seminar discussion notes.