

Brand Communication Management of Startups in Portugal

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Abstract: In this article we briefly present the outlines of a research project on the challenges of managing communication among startups in Portugal. The exploratory study was based on the combination of quantitative and qualitative methodologies and sought to analyze how crucial it is for startups to invest in branding and activate their brands through a planned communication strategy. It is universally recognized that the brand represents the most valuable intangible asset for the organization (Aaker, 1996; Kotler et al, 2012; Huseynli, 2022), currently having all the potential of technology to discover patterns of behavior and communication, but without ever compromising the humanization of the brand, despite the fascination with the digital lifestyle (Kotler et al., 2021). In 2014 a brand management methodology for agile companies emerges, Lean Branding (Busche, 2014) that teaches 21st century entrepreneurs the "way to create, communicate and sell a brand, constantly measuring its performance" (Busche, 2014). This methodology cannot be neglected by startups. The big challenge is precisely the crossing of this business area, which is in affirmation, between the branding, since the literature review has shown that we are facing a little explored theme. Also, understanding how Portuguese entrepreneurs deal with the challenges of brand communication in such a competitive ecosystem, even with more modest budgets, and bringing more knowledge about branding applied to Startups, are the major contributions of this study.

Keywords: Brand management, Brand communication, Startups, Lean branding

1. Introduction

The brand is the most valuable asset for any company, because it represents the business. Company financiers were the first to draw the attention of marketers, strategists and managers to the importance of one of the pillars of brand management; brand equity "brand capital" and "brand value" (Kapferer, 2003), but from a more economic perspective, alerting them to the relevance of a company's most important intangible asset: the brand.

Markets are dynamic and very volatile, competition is intense and customers are demanding and aware of the decision-making power they have. Given this scenario, it is easy to understand that the path for companies is to focus on branding as a differentiating factor (Aaker, 2011) to achieve longevity in the market.

The brand only exists when it is activated through communication (Kapferer, 1991), which is a "central element in the brand construction and management processes, as it corresponds to the occasion in which it meets its target audiences" (Arriscado et al., 2015, p.3) and, therefore, making brands closer to stakeholders, transforming them into an integral part of consumers' lives, is one of the objectives of brand communication (Aaker, 2010/2011).

The communication strategy must be planned and not according to the needs of the moment, so that the positioning and identity defined by the company reflects the desired image. A brand's identity must be the result of a deliberate and strategically developed effort by organizations and not be the result of chance (Ruão, 2006), which requires systematic, proactive management and an anticipatory perspective (Aaker, 2010; Kapferer, 2003).

For Kotler et al. (2017), in an increasingly digital and interconnected world, customers do not have as much time to devote attention to the brand and are surrounded by alternatives at every step of the way. It is necessary to be present, get their attention and transmit the message they want to hear, companies have seen the need to create stronger bonds with their customers, focusing on the relationship with them, so communication takes on both a strategic and as tactical and operational in this new reality. It becomes crucial to humanize the brand, because the relationship between brands and consumers is horizontal (Kotler et al., 2017).

People no longer just consume products/services, they buy/consume values, image, which means they need to build an emotional relationship with the brand. Consumers in the digital age "make decisions based not only on the characteristics of products, services and prices, but also on what brands say, what they do, who they are and what causes they stand for" (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018, p.20). Regarding communication, Castells (2017) is emphatic with the concept of changing the power relationship in society as he understands that this is defined by values,

in the form of discourse, that motivate social actors (individual, collective, institutional, etc.) to influence the decision of other actors so that they do their will (Castells, 2017). People influence others, transforming cultures and values with the potential of communication networks.

Over the years, companies have grown and evolved in the market. In this sense, technology began to integrate all sectors of companies, using automated systems (Puntoni et al., 2021). Based on this evolution, companies changed their strategies with the aim of investing more in the use of new technologies, applying Artificial Intelligence (AI) (Du, & Xie, 2021). AI has the potential to increase interaction between brand and consumer, in the same way that companies use AI in digital marketing to help consumers learn more about their products and services, and help them navigate through the abundance of offers they have available in a more effective and efficient way, these same AI tools help companies understand consumers and how to approach them with their product and service offerings (Van Esch, P., & Stewart Black, J., 2021).

This reality paved the way for marketing 5.0 – Technology for Humanity, Kotler et al. (2021) explain how marketers can use technology, in particular artificial intelligence, to satisfy customer needs and make a difference in the world. Marketing 5.0 is data-centric agile marketing, and marketing will continue to be strategic but highly scientific. And it is within this new reality that Startups are born and assert themselves, due to their agility, flexibility and ability to interact with consumers.

2. The Lean Branding Methodology

There are differences between Startups and a conventional company and it is imperative to make the correct distinction, (Blank, 2014). A Startup at the beginning of its activity is necessarily a small or micro company, and needs innovation to not be considered a traditional model company (Sebrae, 2020), however, not all small or micro companies are a Startup. The pace at which traditional small businesses grow is slower.

Startups are not necessarily internet companies, although this modality represents the majority, digital businesses become promising and increasingly attract the attention of large investors (Sebrae, 2020). These arise from ideas from entrepreneurs in a creative and innovative context, aiming to solve a problem (Toledo, 2011). The main characteristics of these businesses are the nature of a temporary organization with the potential for rapid growth, they operate in an environment of extreme uncertainty, in the incessant search for a business model that can become repeatable and scalable. A company established in the market, on the contrary, was designed to execute a business model that could be repeatable and scalable (Blank & Dorf, 2014).

Startups are directly related to the Lean methodology. This methodology is a management philosophy inspired by practices and results that began with Toyota in the 40s. Talking about Lean methodology and Startups takes us to the Lean Startup concept by Eric Ries (2011), who introduced this new concept in the world of Startups.

The Lean Startup methodology, according to Blank (2013), has revealed that it is possible to make the process of creating a company and innovating less risky. For the author, this methodology recommends experimentation instead of detailed planning, the customer's opinion instead of intuition, the interactive path instead of the traditional conception of a finished product from the beginning and presented to the market finished. Although it is only a few years old, concepts such as Minimum Viable Product (MVP) and testing hypotheses acquire meaning in the world of entrepreneurship. The MVP should be a very simple version of the product and include whatever is necessary to convey to the customer as realistic a vision as possible of how the product will work. Only what is necessary to get feedback (Ries, 2011). So, just like building a product, you can also build a brand as the company grows and refine it to find the solution that meets customer preferences. In view of the above, and according to Fresneau (2020), we are faced with a term that is very familiar and increasingly used by entrepreneurs and founders: Minimum Viable Brand (MVB). Being “lean” means understanding that it is not a problem not to have a perfect product upon launch, and this situation is considered the most sensible. The brand will not and should not be perfect when starting the business (Busche, 2014). In this regard, Ries (2012) states in the preface to the book *Lean Branding*, “just as products are never truly finished, brands must also be committed to adaptation and evolution. Managers must build chameleon brands that adapt to consumers' ever-changing needs and desires, putting hypotheses to the test and using what they learn from repetition and adaptation”, Eric Ries in *Lean Branding* (Busche, 2014, p.vii)

The Lean Startup methodology presents itself as a recent and very pertinent topic and therefore, it is imperative to study it since the Lean Branding methodology was inspired by this method. Although Lean Startup is focused on product development and business management, its principles can also be applied to brands. The Lean Startup Build-Measure-Learn cycle is completely valid and easy to apply to the Lean Branding methodology. This

is what the authors Busche demonstrated in the book *Lean Branding* (2014), and Gardner and Cooper, in the book *The Lean Brand* (2014).

Building a brand in companies that operate in volatile markets, “where barriers to entry are low, competition fierce, people's attention increasingly divided, search more sophisticated and easy access to information, it is quickly realized that building a brand disruptive and dynamic, in a context like the one described, is precisely the path for startups” (Busche, 2014, p. 4). For all of this, the author argues that the time has come when branding must be accessible to Startups.

A lean brand is a brand in which an organization and audience achieve a symbiotic relationship around a common value without creating any brand waste. Brands are currently more relevant and effective if managers, entrepreneurs and professionals in the areas of marketing and communication understand the changes that occur, especially in an increasingly globalized and connected world, and learn from them. “Lean brands have conversations, not monologues” (Busche, 2014, p. 218). For Gardner and Cooper (2014), brand means a relationship, and thousands of Startups, entrepreneurs, managers and entrepreneurs fight to, based on these conversations, build passionate relationships with the public (Gardner & Cooper, 2014). Wheeler (2019), in this regard, wrote that “people fall in love with brands, trust them and believe in their superiority” (Wheeler, 2019, p.2).

In *Lean Branding*, we talk about brand innovation. An optimized methodology for creating a disruptive brand centered around experimentation, iteration and elimination of brand waste. This methodology provides a scalable structure for continuous cycles of development and improvement of branding through validated learning and the development of real customers (Gardner & Cooper, 2014).

A world of opportunities has opened up for Startups to be in contact with the customer in the same way as a large company. It is necessary to demystify the idea that marketing and branding are only within the reach of companies with large structures. The *Lean Branding* methodology (Laura Busche, 2014) is proof of this. For all this, we believe it is interesting to study the reality of Portuguese Startups, in their relationship with brands and adoption of Lean branding principles.

3. Building Connections: The Importance of Communication in Brand Consolidation

The function of a brand, nowadays, is not just to identify and differentiate. As highlighted above, the brand currently assumes vital importance for companies, it is universally recognized that the brand represents the most valuable intangible asset for the organization (Aaker, 1996; Kotler et al, 2012; Huseynli, 2022), because it allows managing value that goes beyond your products and services. It is an asset of the organization and, therefore, management should not be restricted to the marketing department, but rather be transversal to the company's structure. The company must provide the brand, first of all, with the content that defines it and gives it identity (reason for being). The brand must have values that allow it to differentiate itself in a market that is increasingly competitive and unstable. When talking about brands, it refers to important associations and memories for consumers, linking an increasingly emotional and symbolic relationship (Aaker, 2010).

The role of branding in the context of business marketing is of paramount importance, as it plays a fundamental role in building an emotional connection with consumers and distinguishing the company from its competitors. As highlighted by Girão, M., & Knupfer, A. M. (2020), a brand truly exists when it is installed in the minds of consumers.

For the brand to “come to life” in the market, it needs to communicate, it is important that the consumer knows it. Kapferer (1991) states that “the brand is a being of discourse. It only exists through communication. Given that the brand states the products or services, it must necessarily take the floor” (Kapferer, 1991, p. 55), so that it can be known and recognized. However, given the high number of messages that reach target audiences, it is increasingly difficult to communicate, get noticed, persuade and influence. More than persuading, now the task is to get noticed. And getting noticed means gaining relevance for what you communicate (Arriscado et al., 2015). And to be relevant in communication, the company must have a pertinent and expressive brand that asserts itself by offering a unique and referential value proposition, differentiated by innovation, capable of distinguishing itself from competitors, gaining customer loyalty and winning the market (Aaker, 2011).

Consistent communication of the brand's values, benefits and differentiators is essential to establish a positive and distinctive image in the minds of consumers compared to the competition, and ensuring a good online experience with the brand will result in a greater chance of interaction with the brand, which will reinforce customer satisfaction (Ho, S. P. S., & Chow, M. Y. C., 2023).

According to Kunch (2018), the complexity of current times, due to globalization, the information technology revolution and the digital era, forces organizations to adopt a new stance and strategically planned communication. Only in this way will they be able to survive in increasingly complex markets and serve increasingly demanding audiences. "Strategic organizational communication plays an important role in the social and organizational context. Faced with the transformations that have been occurring, in the face of the great global uncertainties present in contemporary times, there is no longer space for merely instrumental, technical and tactical communication" (Kunch, 2018, p. 20), because the world we live in is VUCA (Lawrence, 2013), an acronym for volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous.

We are based on the line of reasoning of the authors Zerfass et al. (2018), who state that the "term "strategic communication" operates as a replacement for "integrated communication," which is an umbrella term for all types of goal-oriented communication initiated by organizations to address any kind of stakeholders and audiences" (Zerfass et al, 2018, p.488). For an organization to communicate strategically, it has to work online and offline communication in an integrated way. A holistic approach, which brings together the various areas of communication previously considered in isolation. It is, therefore, about encompassing a set of communication actions designed, structured, planned and integrated to achieve the objectives of an organization and fulfill its mission (Zerfass et al., 2018).

We live in the age of information, communication, technology, big data, computational algorithms, so companies have to follow this evolution to impact internal and external audiences. This is a prominent and valid reality for large companies, small and micro companies, where Startups are naturally inserted.

4. Methodology

With regard to the methodological procedures adopted, we chose to use method triangulation, considering it to be the most appropriate approach to achieving the objectives established for the research. Methodological triangulation involves the collaboration of a team with diverse disciplinary skills, working cooperatively at all stages of the research, integrating different methods and disciplines to bring quantitative and qualitative approaches closer together. In this approach, the methodological specificities of each discipline are not diluted, but rather maintained, allowing an inter or transdisciplinary perspective of research (Minayo, 2014).

As for data collection instruments, in-depth interviews with content analysis and questionnaires with statistical analysis (SPSS) were used. The questionnaire consisted of 21 questions, using a Likert scale from 1 to 6 points. It was applied to a sample of 259 Portuguese entrepreneurs, covering the north, center and south of Portugal, including the islands, and took place over approximately 5 months.

Interviews, one of the most common techniques in scientific work, allow obtaining a large amount of information in an active and informative way. For this exploratory research, 13 interviews were carried out divided into two segments. In segment 1 - Entrepreneurs, we included 6 entrepreneurs from Startups and 2 from Scaleups. We chose to interview Scaleup entrepreneurs to understand whether, during the business transition phase, concerns about branding are the same as in the initial starting up phase. In segment 2 - Specialists - 3 experts in entrepreneurship and 2 in branding participated. The entrepreneurship experts interviewed were: João Borge, former Director of Startup Portugal; Rafael Rocha, professional with 20 years of experience in entrepreneurship and former director of entrepreneurship at ANJE (National Association of Young Entrepreneurs); and Inês Santos Silva, Executive Director of Aliados Consulting. The branding professionals who participated in the study were: Laura Busche, author of the Lean Branding methodology; and Paulo de Lencastre, University Professor and author of several books in the area.

We chose the Delphi method because it is a rich approach that "enables the gathering of a set of opinions from experts and professionals, who work in different areas and who are geographically dispersed, with the goal of understanding and seeking consensus on complex topics, controversial and comprehensive" (Marques & Freitas, 2018, p.411).

5. Results Discussion Analysis

The journey of a Startup is a topic of discussion among entrepreneurship experts in Portugal. While some suggest a life cycle of 1 to 5 years, data from European Startup Monitor indicates that, in general, these companies are less than 10 years old. By combining information from the literature, data from the European Startup Monitor and expert opinions, it is possible to propose a more precise conceptual definition for the term Startup.

We can understand a Startup as a nascent company destined for growth, with a life cycle generally no longer than 10 years and divided into 2 distinct phases. In the first three years, it faces an unstable and challenging period, characterized by a lack of financial and human resources. During this time, conditions of risk and uncertainty are exacerbated as the company relentlessly searches for a replicable and scalable business model. After this initial stage, known as the "Valley of Death", when the Startup reaches the financial break-even point, reality changes, allowing greater autonomy and different priorities. After the fifth year, the company enters a phase of maturity, going through several stages of growth before consolidating itself as an SME or large company. In this process, it relies on professionals, generally led by the founder or a team of up to 30 employees, and works with digital and technological tools, where innovation and disruption are fundamental.

According to the quantitative study, during the first years, brand management may not be a priority for entrepreneurs, who focus on areas such as product/service development, internal management and business model dynamization, due to resource limitations, as shown in table 1.

Table 1: Startup Development Factors

Startup development factors	Average	Standard deviation
Product/Service	5.54	.617
Internal management	5.40	.699
Streamlining the business model	5.10	.818
Brand communication	5.01	.894
Attracting investment	4.34	1.367

Table 1 - Prepared by the authors

However, they recognize the importance of brand management to stand out in a competitive market, where differentiation becomes crucial. To achieve this, it is essential that entrepreneurs invest in creating a strong brand identity and positioning it in the market with a unique value proposition. Lencastre states, "the essence of Startup is differentiation", referring to the intimate connection between entrepreneurship and the idea of standing out from the competition.

Branding essentially encompasses the management of a company's brand strategies. This implies careful planning, structuring and management of the brand Aaker (2010). As Ruão (2006) states, brand identity should not be left to chance, but rather deliberately worked on and managed.

Paulo de Lencastre emphasizes the importance of finding a differentiating concept that resonates with the community. With the advent of the virtual world, new opportunities arise for even small businesses to develop their brands, thanks to innovative methods and tools that do not require large investments. The Lean Branding methodology, for example, aims to demystify the idea that branding is a time-consuming and expensive process. Busche, author of this methodology, in her work provides tools that enable the creation of agile and consistent brands, with a focus on conversion.

Portuguese entrepreneurs recognize the importance of brand management and have a clear understanding of what constitutes a brand. They associate the brand with different dimensions, such as identity, image, logo, company, value system and relationship. However, there is a tendency for some entrepreneurs to associate the brand only with its visual identity. It is crucial to intervene to clarify this concept and emphasize that visual decisions must be aligned with a clear strategy, defined mission and a consistent brand story. Lean Branding focuses on this reality, highlighting the importance of the brand's strategy, history and symbols, and how these elements must be monitored over time to ensure effective communication. This methodology emphasizes agility and the importance of continually measuring performance, especially in a digital market where conversion is crucial. Although Portuguese Startups deal with limited resources and teams with few employees, the collaborative mentality is present, as organizations tend to be more horizontal and less hierarchical. However, they face a series of challenges.

Laura Busche highlights that the biggest challenge when developing a brand is the difficulty in creating a story that goes beyond functional attributes and benefits. It is essential to connect the product with the symbolic and psychological benefits, maintaining a balance to generate a mix of enchantment and rationality in the consumer, leading them to make a conscious and impulse purchase. The Colombian author provides five pieces of advice to Portuguese entrepreneurs: 1) they must develop strategies to highlight their businesses in an agile market,

impacting audiences, especially early adopters, who are more informed and demanding. Many entrepreneurs face difficulties in strategic planning, and it is important to understand that success usually comes after several trials and errors; 2) in saturated markets, they compete with established companies and other emerging startups. The path will be to develop a unique value proposition and communicate it in a clear and convincing way to stand out from the competition; 3) entrepreneurs, especially those at the beginning of their activity, must share lessons learned, knowledge and tools used; 4) it is crucial that Startups invest in internal research for decision-making, reducing dependence on data from secondary sources. Primary investigations, conducted internally, allow for quick and proactive decisions. The formation of an internal department to conduct in-depth interviews, structured questionnaires and other forms of research is recommended; 5) when a brand enters the global market, entrepreneurs compete on a global, not local, level. It is essential to adjust the brand narrative to the global market, adapting it to different social and cultural conditions and customer expectations. Lean brands must be flexible and adaptable, maintaining two-way communication with consumers rather than monologues. The brand has to be “chameleon-like in this sense and adapt. Lean brands have conversations, not monologues” (Busche, 2014, p.7).

In the view of entrepreneurs and experts, the future of branding in the digital era is shaped by the rapid evolution of the business environment, driven by the speed of change and the increasing complexity of the modern world, characterized by the acronym VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity), as discussed by Lawrence (2013). In this context, companies need to adapt to ongoing transformations, especially in the face of a consumer who plays an increasingly active and creative role in communication.

Changes in brand management suggest that the most agile companies, especially smaller ones, may be best able to transform their brands at the speed required by the constantly changing market. The connectivity provided by digital technology has replaced the traditional model of unilateral communication with a constant dialogue between companies and customers. This has strengthened relations between both parties, placing them side by side in the communication and interaction process. The horizontalization of the communication process brings consumers closer to companies (Kotler et. al, 2017), creating new opportunities for interaction and influence. New consumer profiles emerge, such as “prosumers” and “adprosumers”, created by technological developments. The internet allows brands to get closer to these audiences, enabling the co-creation of products and content, which facilitates the dissemination of the brand's image.

With easier access to international markets and more controlled investments, competition increases, but more growth opportunities for companies also emerge. It is essential that companies monitor the performance of their brands and measure results so they can reposition, readjust and redesign communication strategies as necessary. The rapid evolution of the market requires companies to be present in new channels and emerging social networks. This requires professionals with up-to-date skills and qualifications, such as community managers. The branding strategy must be developed quickly, otherwise companies risk losing valuable opportunities.

In the context of Lean Branding, a metaphor used by author Laura Busche (2014) is that of the chameleon and the dinosaur. Companies that maintain cumbersome organizational structures and time-consuming processes are less equipped to succeed, while those that are agile and adaptable are more likely to thrive.

According to Lencastre (an expert in brand semiotics who participated in the study), the future of branding in the digital era will be less centered on brand owners, making room for more open and democratic management. Stakeholders will have a more active role in product design, communication and pricing policy, making brand management more multifaceted and participatory.

Based on the information collected through interviews and questionnaires carried out in this investigation, it was found that entrepreneurs tend to develop a communication strategy for their brands in the most advanced phase of the business, generally after the first three years of operation. In the initial stages, Startups' main concerns revolve around overcoming financial and human resource limitations. This finding confirms that Portuguese Startups approach the communication management of their brands in a planned manner. It has been proven that brand communication plays a crucial role in leveraging business, demonstrating the importance that the topic assumes.

Risky (2015) argues that nowadays it is not enough to have a quality product or a differentiated service, it is essential to publicize and value it through communication. The digital medium emerges as the communication platform par excellence for these businesses, allowing them to win new customers and encourage interaction with the public, which paves the way for co-creation. Startups demonstrate a special affinity with social

networks, as they offer visibility at almost zero cost and make it possible to connect with the world in a matter of seconds, without demanding anything in return, just quality content and maintaining a solid relationship with the clients.

As highlighted by Aaker (2011), the internet provides almost everyone with the opportunity to serve consumers directly and transform the relationship with them into a powerful brand-building tool. This digital environment makes it easier to build a strong presence in the market, strengthening relationships with customers and effectively expanding the brand's reach.

Entrepreneurs, driven by the context of digital natives, adopt a strategic approach from the beginning of their businesses when selecting and planning their presence on digital social networks. These platforms play a fundamental role as the first contact with the market, allowing consumers to assess interest in the products/services offered or in ongoing promotional campaigns. Among the most used networks are Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter and YouTube, with different strategies being used, such as content marketing, storytelling, videos, attractive images, concise messages, contests, stories and collaborative partnerships, for example with influencers including nano influencers. Getting the right message across to your target audience is critical, but it can be difficult with limited resources. Using digital platforms and social networks in a creative and strategic way to reach and engage the target audience effectively, leveraging the power of visual and narrative content, could be the way forward.

Faced with a wide range of digital marketing strategies, contact points, tools and services available, it is observed that Portuguese entrepreneurs tend to adopt the best known, and still little explored, for example, the potential of chatbots. This evolution has completely transformed the way companies manage their businesses, as the fast pace allows managers to monitor brand behavior in real time, thanks to constant feedback from the public.

Based on these reflections, it becomes clear that Startup professionals need to closely monitor emerging trends, identify market requests and develop strategies to discover customer needs, with branding as a primary concern from the beginning of the process.

6. Conclusions

After completing this study, which contributed to both business and academic circles, we highlight the main insights, although there is still a vast area of study on branding applied to Startups to investigate. The insights extracted from this research have a relevant impact on the academic field, namely: presentation of a proposal for a conceptual definition of Startup; a deeper understanding of how Portuguese entrepreneurs involved in the Startup universe define and manage their brands, in addition to understanding the importance they attribute to it; the dissemination of branding trends in the digital era, in which consumers are increasingly connected; the application of the principles of the Lean Branding methodology enables brand management work even with modest budgets, demystifying the idea that this practice is exclusive to large companies.

From this study, some contributions emerge aimed at entrepreneurs, aiming to assist them in brand management in an extremely competitive, volatile and aggressive market: the importance of integrating brand management is recognized from the moment the business idea arises, and not only after overcoming the initial challenges; It is highlighted that the brand has a crucial impact on the Startup's success, going beyond the creation of visual elements; introduction of the concept of Minimum Viable Brand (MVB - Minimum Viable Brand), which, when strategically applied according to the Lean Branding methodology, provides significant benefits to Startups, and finally shares the advice of the author of the Lean Branding methodology on brand management, based in her vast experience as a mentor to several Startups over the years.

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