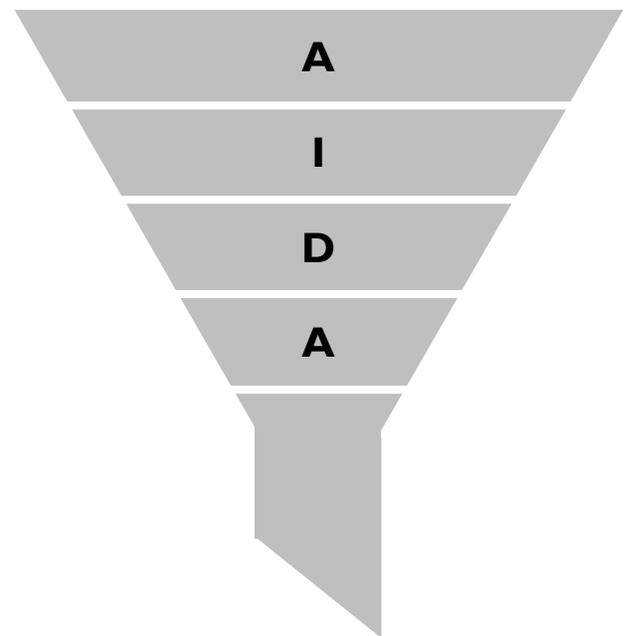# The Brand Funnel

The Brand Funnel is one of the oldest and most venerated frameworks in branding. It's about half a century older than Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, or the two-by-two matrix. It underpins many of the models used to measure and build brand equity. And it has survived relatively intact, despite the meddlings of successive generations of marketing and management theorists.

If your job involves thinking about the interaction between people and brands, it's likely that some version of the Brand Funnel is lurking somewhere in the back of your mind.

Although it's now considered a marketing concept, the Brand Funnel owes its existence to an interest in salesmanship that emerged around the turn of the twentieth century: professionals were keen to apply the philosophy of scientific management to establish a formula for how best to structure sales conversations and advertisements. Although the various books and articles published on the subject differed in their terminology, they tended to focus on the same four aspects necessary to create a sale:

How to attract attention.

How to generate interest.

How to arouse desire.

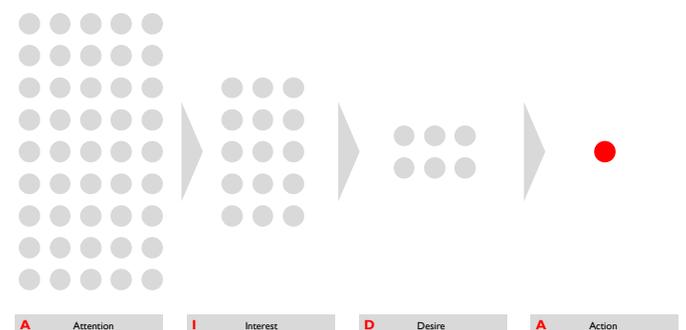And how to create enough conviction to secure a sale.

They say that success has many fathers and the Brand Funnel is no exception: Elias St. Elmo Lewis, A.F. Sheldon Ralph Starr Butler and Frank Hutchinson Dukesmith have all been credited with developing these aspects into a four-step model for successful selling: attention, interest, desire and conviction.
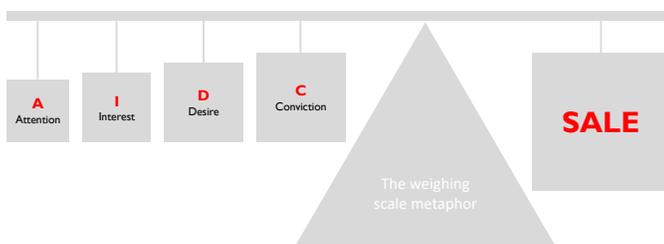
Dukesmith used the visual metaphor of a set of weighing scales to demonstrate the importance of achieving the right balance of attention, interest desire and conviction to secure a sale. He believed that the steps should be approached in sequence: the seller's job was to take the audience on a journey through each stage, until conviction had been achieved and the sale had been closed. By 1921, the four steps had evolved to attention/ interest/ desire/ action, which have become known by their more memorable acronym, 'Aida'.

Originally, the Aida model was developed as a way to structure a sales conversation, or an advertisement. It was a helpful framework for thinking about the role of a headline and the content of supporting copy and imagery. It explains the existence of CTAs. But the Aida model's original purpose was unambitious relative to its modern use: a simple mnemonic to help draft a sales letter or write a print ad. It focused on a single communication or conversation. As the job of selling and marketing evolved, so did the role of the Aida model. During the 1940s, marketers assumed greater responsibility for planning and insight. In the 1950s, this broadening influence was crystallised in the idea of a marketing mix by Neil H. Borden. And by the 1960s, the marketer's remit had expanded to include the design of a holistic customer journey and measuring marketing effectiveness at each point along it.

The role of Aida evolved accordingly: its lens was widened to take in the entirety of the brand experience, rather than a single point of contact. Along with this change in focus came a change in metaphor: the brand funnel was born.

A Attention / I Interest / D Desire / C Conviction / SALE

The weighing scale metaphor

A Attention / I Interest / D Desire / A Action

In the traditional funnel metaphor, consumers begin with a broad set of brands that have their attention and gradually whittle down their list to a single brand as they move through each stage. The Brand Funnel demonstrated how Aida could be used by marketers to manage the entire customer journey: designing interactions to ensure that the target market's attention has been captured, that their interest is sustained, that desire is aroused and can be acted upon.

The funnel depicted above can also be interpreted in two ways: in a traditional, customer's-eye-view, each dot in the funnel represents a brand. But the funnel can also be seen from the marketer's perspective: with each dot representing a target customer. This is how the Brand Funnel is generally represented in brand equity research, usually in the form of a pyramid:
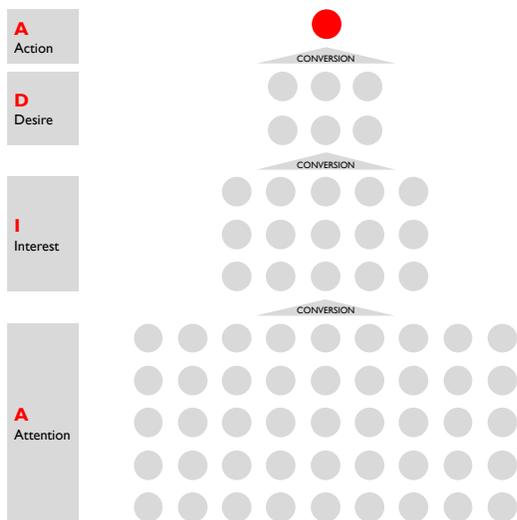
This version of the Brand Funnel frames the marketer's role differently: it establishes how successfully people in the target market are being 'converted' from one stage of the funnel to the next. By identifying and addressing the biggest bottlenecks in the funnel, marketers can create the biggest uplift in sales (at least in theory). So, while the customer's-eye-view of the funnel helps marketers manage their brand experience, this marketer's-eye-view of the funnel helps to measure its effectiveness.

The Brand Funnel has been tweaked and improved in various ways over the decades. One of the most important evolutions is suggested by marketing theorists like Philip Kotler, who challenges the idea that the pointy bit of the funnel should end with a sale. The rise of social media has demonstrated the importance of peer-to-peer recommendation in brand-building (even before social media, many marketers were preoccupied with building word-of-mouth). Kotler's view is that the ultimate ambition of a marketer should be to create an advocate, rather than just a buyer or consumer. So, in 2017 he refined the Brand Funnel into a five-stage model:

A1: Aware
People who are passively exposed to a brand, either directly through its own marketing efforts, or indirectly through the advocacy of others.

A2: Appeal
People who are affected enough by the brand and its advocates to commit it to memory.

A3: Ask
People who are motivated to seek out information on a brand from other people, media and the brand itself.
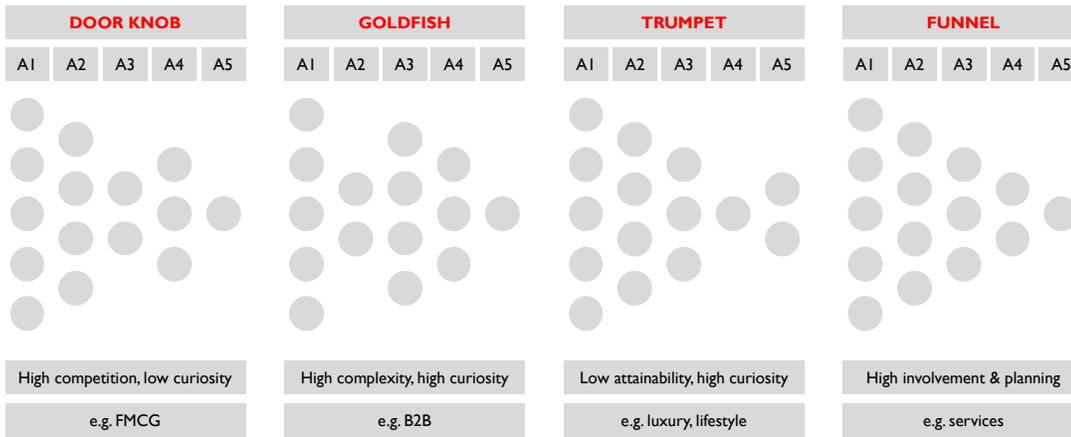
A4: Act
People who purchase and use the brand, as well as any associated post-purchase products or services.

A5: Act again / Advocate
People who repeat-purchase and recommend the brand to others.

This evolution of the funnel reflects a broader shift in marketing's focus, away from transactions with consumers who are primarily valued for what they can spend, towards active dialogue with people who are also valued for what they can contribute in terms of feedback, new ideas and advocacy.

Kotler's model introduces another, even more significant departure from the traditional brand funnel: it does not assume that the number of people or brands in the model decreases as you move through each stage. In other words: it's no longer funnel shaped. Kotler suggests that the funnel is only one of four archetypal decision-making processes:

DOOR KNOB	GOLDFISH	TRUMPET	FUNNEL
A1 A2 A3 A4 A5	A1 A2 A3 A4 A5	A1 A2 A3 A4 A5	A1 A2 A3 A4 A5
High competition, low curiosity	High complexity, high curiosity	Low attainability, high curiosity	High involvement & planning
e.g. FMCG	e.g. B2B	e.g. luxury, lifestyle	e.g. services

I'm not going to get into the details of each of the four archetypes, partly because they don't make much sense to me but principally because I don't think they are particularly helpful. The really valuable thing Kotler's model does is to challenge the assumption that the customer journey involves a gradual process of narrowing down a list of brands: for example, we might find that the number of brands we consider actually increases once we begin to research a purchase, and many of us recommend brands that we have no direct experience of purchasing for ourselves.

Kotler bent the Brand Funnel out of shape, but others have bent it even further. In a 2009 McKinsey Quarterly article, consultants David Court, Dave Elzinga, Susie Mulder and Ole Jørgen Vetvik challenged another of the Funnel's assumptions: that it involves a linear journey. The McKinsey model built on a review of almost 20,000 consumers across five industries and three continents, which suggested the decision-making process was closer to a circular journey than a linear process. A marketer's job is not to shepherd people through a series of steps, but to design a coherent brand experience that responds to their needs at each stage. The consumer decision journey was subsequently updated by McKinsey in 2015 and given a fancy new name: the Accelerated Loyalty Journey.

Consider → Evaluate → Buy

The McKinsey Accelerated Loyalty Journey

Consider · Evaluate · Buy · Experience · Advocate · Bond
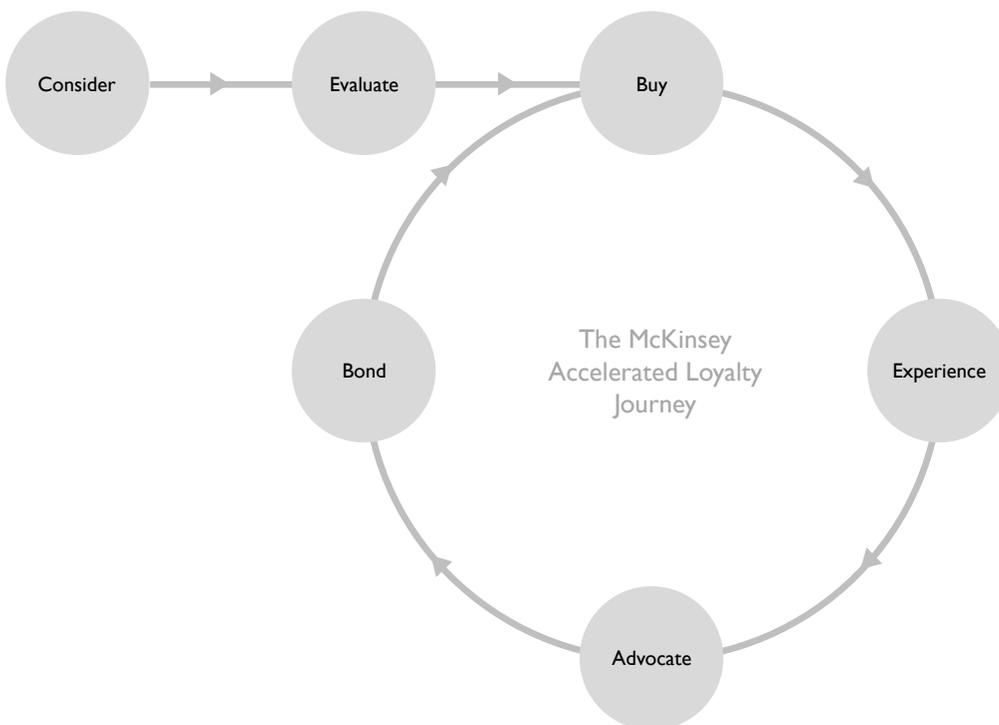
McKinsey's model places relatively little emphasis on the part of the journey that the Aida model was initially designed to focus on: according to its creators, businesses that are truly great at designing and optimising decision journeys can radically compress the initial consideration and evaluation stages of the journey, or even eliminate them altogether. The 'loyalty loop' through which people buy, use, recommend and bond with a brand is considered by McKinsey to be a higher priority for marketers, although they don't make a great case for why. It's easy to get the impression that the McKinsey model focuses on the parts of a brand experience that McKinsey cares about the most, rather than the aspects that matter most to marketers and their customers.

Fortunately, we have the ability to pick and choose what works best in a given situation. All of these models have something to offer when you're designing a customer journey or brand experience. They also share at least one crucial shortcoming that we have an opportunity to address.

Outcome-focused
The reason the Aida model remains relevant is that it defines an ideal brand experience by breaking it down into a memorable, manageable set of outcomes, which it should be designed to inspire, such as attention, desire, interest and action. It's entirely fair to add to this list (advocacy is an obvious omission) but it's important to be clear about who's perspective matters most: the marketer or the user.

User-centric
The Aida model is unambiguous in this respect. Success is defined entirely from the marketer's point of view: 'What are the outcomes we need to achieve in order to secure a sale?' But Kotler's funnel is more ambiguous in its language: awareness, appeal and advocacy are marketing goals, whereas asking and acting are tasks performed by the user. McKinsey's model is also a mishmash of marketer and user perspectives. I'd argue that if the goal of the model is to design and measure a more effective brand experience, then it should follow the basic principles of user-centric design: the most basic of which is surely to design around the user.

Users don't seek awareness: they seek knowledge. They don't seek interest: they seek inspiration. I've never met a person who wants to bond with a brand, but I have met people who want to feel rewarded or recognised for their custom. Framing each of the steps in the journey from the perspective of what the user wants to achieve makes it much more likely that the marketer will succeed in designing positive interactions.

Beyond transactional
Kotler's and McKinsey's bending of the funnel is significant: the marketer's role isn't simply to lead people towards a sale or transaction. If the purpose is to establish a long-term relationship, then there may no fixed beginning or end point at all. People can skip over stages; they can jump between them. Kotler's model anticipates that this will be influenced by the user's level of knowledge and interest, as well as the context in which a brand competes.

The efficiency of the experience can't consequently be defined by the ratio of people who move from one step to the next. We have to work harder than that if we want to understand how good a job we're doing: to understand the needs and perceptions that underlie the user's experience at each stage.

Towards the truly circular
Although it has the appearance of circularity, the McKinsey model is based on a linear concept of production and consumption: a business makes a product and then a consumer consumes it (and disposes of it). But marketing is already moving beyond this form of thinking, towards the circular economy. Broadly speaking, circular economic business models are built on the idea that waste can be designed out of a brand experience. This can be done in a number of ways: involving people in the design of their own products and services; rental; remanufacture; designing experiences that allow people to repair, reuse, refurbish, and rent their stuff.

These business models require people to do more than simply consume or recommend brands. Circular experiences already encourage people to form self-policing communities; to buy, store and sell energy; to rent their stuff to strangers; or to take their jeans back to the store to be repaired. These will introduce entirely new steps to the Brand Funnel: co-creation, resale, refurbishment, reuse and countless other interactions that I lack the imagination to anticipate. The thinking that underlies the Aida Model, the Brand Funnel and the McKinsey model will continue to exist, but it will need to evolve to reflect these new types of interaction between people and brands. I expect the future of the Brand Funnel will be ever more circular.