Breaking Up is Hard to Do: The Ups and Downs of Divorcing Brands

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When Alicia Keys was officially appointed BlackBerry's creative director in early 2013, she described the different stages of her relationship with the brand. She had previously been in a ''long-term relationship with BlackBerry''. At some point she started to ''flirt with other smartphone brands''. The iPhone and Android seemed much sexier to her, and she turned her back on BlackBerry – like many other ardent admirers of the former cult brand.

BlackBerry realized that it had to work hard to regain Alicia's interest. It relaunched with a new platform, a new phone and a number of new, user-friendly features. Ultimately, BlackBerry won her back. She claimed to have ''an exclusive relationship with the BlackBerry 10''. But not all brand relationships have such happy endings. Alicia's flings with other brands might have led to a permanent farewell for Blackberry. Just as in personal relationships, even close brand commitments sometimes come to an end.

Why consumers disadopt brands /// Consumers have various reasons for breaking up with brands. Sometimes their reasons are quite banal: Maybe they move to a place where the brand is not available, or they simply find a better alternative. But sometimes disadoption is more complicated, involving a mixed emotional process that can take a lot of time. Relationships with brands are in many ways like relationships between people. The reasons for disadopting a brand can be remarkably similar to the reasons for breaking up with a partner or spouse:

CASE STUDY: LEAVING FACEBOOK

Opening a Facebook account is easy: It takes a few minutes at most. Leaving Facebook is a different story. In an in-depth analysis of information posted on the Internet, we learned a lot about how and why consumers leave Facebook and what they feel throughout the process of leaving.

In posted entries on Facebook, blogs, discussion groups and online magazines, we found breakup stories that began long before the first real action was taken, and did not end with a simple deletion of the account. Consumers found themselves on a roller coaster of emotions, discussing the psychological fallout with friends and family throughout the process. Sooner or later consumers become aware of the far-reaching social consequences of their breakup decision: missed birthdays, an inability to play online games with friends, a lack of access to online social services. Sometimes the level of deprivation was so bad that people rejoined the social network. Some found themselves in on-again-off-again relationships, caught in a vortex of emotions tugging them toward and away from the brand.

For many, their Facebook relationships were redefined and started anew with different routines and objectives. In other cases, people stayed away permanently, relieved and liberated once the disentanglement was finished. For those freed from their Facebook entanglements, leaving the brand felt like successful negotiation of an addiction and the beginning of a new phase of life.
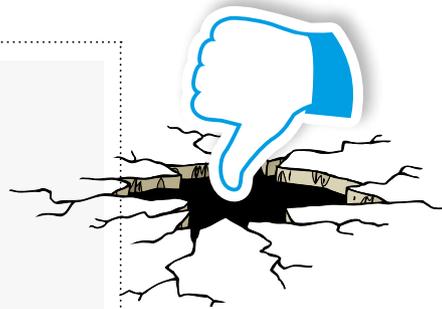
> Pre-existing doom: The brand does not match the consumer. Sooner or later the consumer figures this out.

> The brand changes for the worse: Quality declines, the target group shifts, or the style changes.

> ''You're not the brand I married'': The brand does not live up to its promises; the qualities it advertises turn out to be untrue.

> The consumer changes, but the brand doesn't change with them: This happens when personal circumstances change, consumers outgrow brands, or financial and situational restrictions make a change necessary.

> Brand misbehavior forces the consumer to leave: Consumers can feel betrayed by inattentive or rude service staff, or if their complaints are ignored.

> The brand ''dumps'' the consumer for a better relationship: Sometimes the promise of an attractive target market can cause marketers to shift attention elsewhere; sometimes the lifetime value of a customer can seem low in the face of alternatives.

Disadoption of favorite brands doesn't happen overnight /// Especially when the brand has played a major role in a consumer's life, or has been used intensively, the consumer-brand breakup will prove an extended process and not a clear-cut, ''it's now over'' one-time event. Breakups include a phase of deterioration in which the consumer disengages, often slowly, sometimes painfully, from the brand. Seen through the relationship prism, the disadoption process is even more diverse and complex than the concept of brand switching would lead us to assume.

"Deleting my Facebook account was a four-day affair. It took me that long to disentangle myself from the service and to let others know how else they could find me. "Disentangling" entailed deleting my photos, "unliking" everything and disconnecting all of the third-party services that used Facebook Connect to log me in."
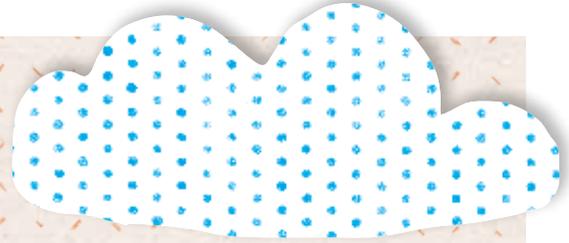
"I reactivated my Facebook account. Rejecting it felt, well, extreme. You can't get away from it. It's everything. It's everywhere. We can't reject it entirely. But I am approaching it this time with new wariness, not as a place to make and maintain friends but where, as an author, I can cultivate an image."
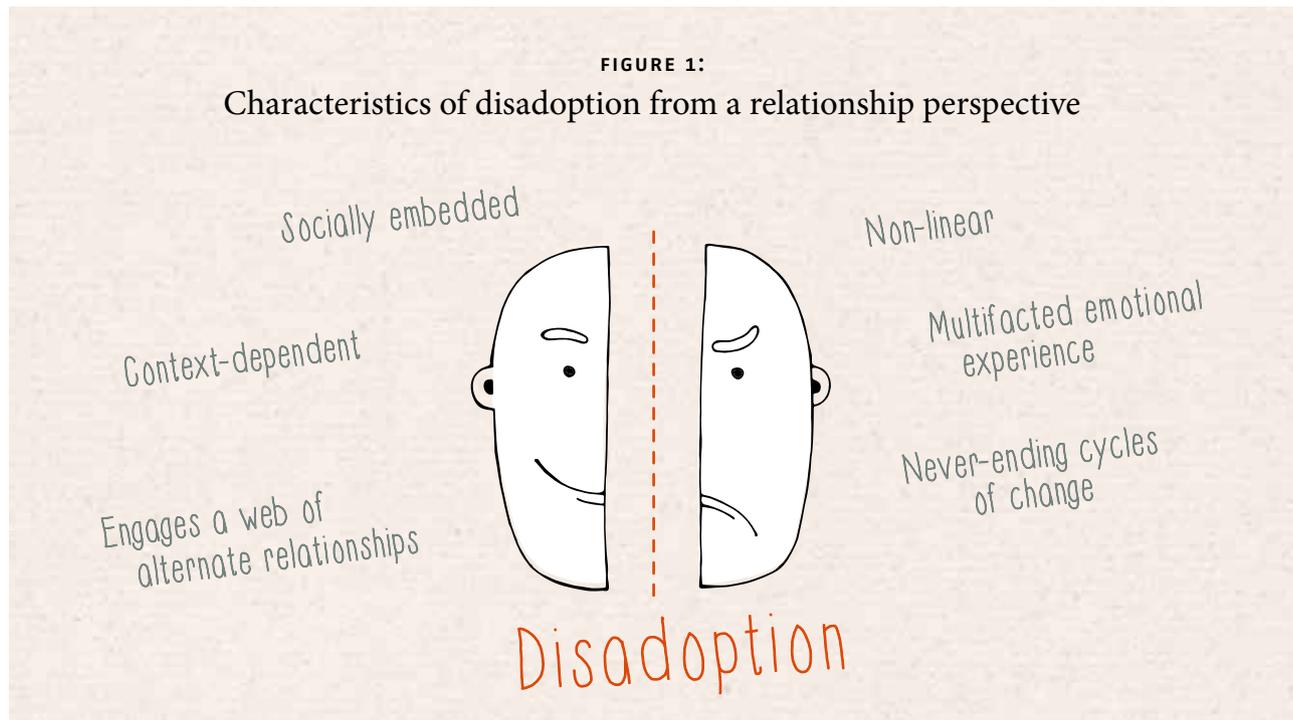
"I found a tiny link at the bottom of the security settings page for "how to deactivate Facebook." After clicking the link, a page popped up with photos of me and my friends. 'Jake will miss you,' one caption read. 'Jules will miss you,' 'Aaron will miss you.' All of my friends were smiling at me and telling me to please don't go."

"(…) my decision to jettison Facebook has drawn me closer to those that matter and allowed peripheral acquaintances to fade away naturally. I can no longer just toss a meaningless 'Happy Birthday, ugly!' on my friends' Facebook walls, but instead must all them to express such sentiments."

"When I broke up with Facebook, I lost access to my friends. In the span of two weeks, I missed a friend's birthday, a family get-together, and a lunch with friends."

"I have toyed with the idea of logging back in, but prying Facebook's sticky tentacles out of my life has inexorably improved my life, and I urge you to give it a shot, if only for a week."

FIGURE 1:

Characteristics of disadoption from a relationship perspective

Socially embedded

Non-linear

Context-dependent

Multifaceted emotional experience

Never-ending cycles of change

Engages a web of alternate relationships

Disadoption

The order and lived experience of events in the breakup process varies substantially: No one-size-fits-all model exists here. One commonality is that disconnecting is generally accompanied by mixed and intense emotions, alternating from feeling on top of the world to the depths of despair. Regret sometimes takes over with on-and-off attempts to revive the relationship. A clear break is the exception rather than the rule.

Breakups are also networked phenomena: they are not isolated to the person and the brand. Friends and family often get involved in the ongoing breakup. Invited to or not, they offer their opinions and advice. Other brand relationships are also affected by the disconnection, and this can speed up or delay the process of breaking up. If there is a ready alternative at hand, the process may go quickly. If other brands and routines need to be replaced, the process may slow down.

Even when consumers stop using a brand, they still have a relationship with it: The relationship merely changes its form. A brand – like a person – can go from being a best friend to a platonic love, a distant friend, a stalker, or even an enemy. Breakups are never the end of the relationship. Rather, they redefine the type of relationship and are part of a never-ending cycle of change.

Finding the good in the bad /// Living through the end of a close relationship can be a painful process, but even this is not necessarily all bad. Consumers may experience a loss, but overcoming loss generates feelings of freedom and renewed self-discovery. Stress is replace d by relief: the joy of having escaped from an emotional drain. Like any period of life change, the breakup offers an opportunity for learning and personal growth. Once disconnection is accomplished, it leaves room for renewal, self-enhancement and change.

So what? Implications for brand managers /// Brand managers are often so fixated on starting relationships and making them stronger that they fail to realize that relationship endings require active management as well. Sure, you can try to prevent breakups by staying fresh and exciting, managing customer complaints, and rewarding customers to keep the relationship healthy. We know these techniques, and we know they are sometimes not enough. Brand breakups are part of life, and sometimes we are best served by accepting them on their own terms.

> *Manage customer churn carefully* /// Standardized approaches to churn are risky. The reasons for leaving a brand relationship, and the processes involved in the breakup, are so varied that cookie-cutter reactions like simply sending price discounts or ''we want you back'' deals may do more harm than good.

> *Don't try to keep customers at any cost* /// Sometimes a breakup will be imperative in the eyes of the consumer. CRM programs must accept that sometimes there exists a point of no return. When that point is reached, it is better to let customers go than to try to make them stay at any cost. Just as in personal relationships, accepting a breakup makes it easier to hold onto positive memories and remain on good terms later on. This is particularly important in business given the power of word of mouth.

> *Know that the end is not always the end* /// Former relationships are still relationships. Although transformed, they can still be positive, as with a distant friend, or negative, like the relationship with a betrayed spouse or between stalker and prey. Transformed relationships can also involve different levels of activity. If the former relationship is still perceived in a positive light, it may be possible to revive it or transform it back into a more active, intense form. If it is negative, you may still need to manage it lest your other, healthy customers be swayed.

> *Take advantage of the regret that can color relationship endings* /// Relationship management programs – especially in the area of services – should not stop too early. In this context, the following comparison may help: Think of a person tempted to try out a new, more stylish hairdresser. She might be disappointed with her new style and long to return to her old stylist, who knew just what style suited her. However, she might not dare to return because she feels bad for or ashamed of having abandoned her ''long-standing partner''. Most likely, it will be sufficient for the stylist to send her a short, friendly note explaining that she will always be welcome, to break the ice and win back the ''prodigal daughter''.

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FURTHER READING

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