

# Brand Image and Walt Disney: A Qualitative Analysis of “Magical Gatherings”

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## ABSTRACT

Brilliant brand images have become increasingly essential to the longevity and popularity of products in today’s marketplace. Although much research has covered the theoretical aspects of brand image, little has focused on the actual techniques used to create successful brand images and the criteria by which brand images should be judged. By comparing the brand image of the Magical Gatherings vacation planning service website to Haedrich’s (1993) roughly developed brand image criteria, the researcher uncovered four themes that could be considered brand image building techniques: (1) A Magical Gatherings vacation is a way of purging one’s guilt about not spending more time with loved ones, (2) Buy, buy, buy, (3) The most magical website on the World Wide Web, and (4) Only the best for our guests. These themes provide valuable insight about what should be included in a successful brand image and provide a launch pad for further research into the vaguely defined field of brand image development.

**Keywords:** image, brand image, image-building techniques

## INTRODUCTION

There is perhaps no greater priority among organizations than developing, projecting, and maintaining positive images of themselves and their products and services. A brilliant image can strengthen an organization’s credibility, increase its sales, and help the organization bounce back from attacks—an idea termed the “halo effect.” Positive brand images persuade customers to engage in desired economic action—to buy a specific brand or product. Haedrich (1993) goes on to mention the interdependence between brand and corporate image: “Brands are an important device for legitimating the company toward stakeholders” (p. 89). And vice versa, “The corporate image will rub off on the brand image” (p. 89). Thus, a good brand image will popularize not only a specific product but also the company that provides it. It is not surprising, then, that organizations may invest large amounts of time, money, and personnel into developing and maintaining a positive image of their products and the company as a whole.

Perhaps one of the most visible and successful examples of corporate and brand image building is the Walt Disney Corporation and its new vacation planning package, “Magical Gatherings.” The Walt Disney image, management techniques, and products are known throughout the world, yet surprisingly few studies have been conducted to discover how the Disney Corporation and its resulting products manage to be all that they are. Most studies of the Walt Disney Corporation have targeted the content of its popular movies, including “Pocahontas” (Ono & Buescher, 2001) and “Beauty and the Beast” (Swan, 1999). These studies dealt with the movies’ representations of minorities and emotions through animation and verbal content.

One major study, conducted by Van Maanen (1991), delved into the inner workings of the Disney organizational culture and power structure. Van Maanen focused mostly on Disneyland ride operators and how they are strictly trained and managed. He discovered that all facets of employee life are governed and carefully observed by management in order to maintain careful control of the Disney image to park guests. Because Disney employees are the people who represent the Disney Corporation to the general public, they are carefully trained to project images of helpfulness, caring, and sincerity. “False moves, rude words, careless disregard, detected insincerity, or a sleepy or bored presence can all undermine the enterprise and ruin a sale,” (Van Maanen, 1991, p. 59).

Waterman and Peters (1982) found much the same thing when they were allowed backstage at Walt Disney World to observe cast member training first hand. Disney sustains its magical, satisfying image by training its cast members from the very first day to view their work as a “role” in “the greatest show on earth.” Nothing is left to chance during training—cast members quickly learn the distinction between “onstage” and “backstage” and are carefully prepared to deal with any situation in an “approved” and appropriate manner. “The stars of the mass

people-handling business are McDonald's and Disney. We find it nearly impossible to fault either on its ability to serve customers with consistent distinction and quality" (Waterman & Peters, 1982, p. 191).

How companies maintain a high level of consistency in image-building—especially on a brand level—has received little attention thus far. Haedrich (1993) admits "the mechanisms that help make brand images consistent . . . have so far remained largely unexplored" (p. 89). While Disney has commonly been hailed as a brand image success story, almost no research has been conducted to demystify how the Disney Corporation actually puts brand image-building techniques to work. Answers to these questions may provide much useful information and strategies for today's organizations.

Before the idea of brand image can be related to Disney, we must define and explain the types of image, understand the importance of image, and explore what makes up a strong brand image.

### *Image*

The term "image" in today's world has many overlapping meanings stemming from hundreds of different image-related research results. Horowitz (1970) found that images are collections of memory fragments, reconstructions, reinterpretations, and symbols standing for objects, feelings, and ideas. Wilcox, Ault, and Agee (1987) put the term "image" into an organizational framework by saying that an organization's image is the personality or character of the company projected to the public. Beach (1990) defined images as schemata, or cognitive pathways used for decision-making.

Haedrich (1993) made the all-important distinction between brand image and corporate image. Brand image is the image of the products of the company, while the corporate image is the image of the company itself. The two levels intertwine in that if the brand image is positive, it will reflect well on to the corporate image and vice versa. Thus, Haedrich defined image as the way in which a brand, a company, or a person is experienced. A positive image is one in which the perceived stability and dependability of an object or company is suitable for satisfying the needs of an individual. This idea of image as perception rather than projection hearkens back to Spiegel's research in the early 1960s. "In market psychology, reality does not exist in the objective nature of the product, but solely in the consumers' perception" (Spiegel, 1961, p.29).

By focusing on image perception, we realize that the control of an organization's and brand's image is no longer completely in the hands of company management and must, therefore, be planned and put together in such a way that the greatest number of publics perceive the organization and its products in a positive light. "If the company desires to accomplish its objectives in terms of market share, sales revenues, and profit, it must enjoy a positive reputation with individual relevant subgroups of the public" (Haedrich, 1993, p.86). One of the most effective ways for organizations to establish and strengthen their images is through brand images.

### *Brand Image*

Since one of the most visible elements of an organization's image is the brand image of its products and services, it is vitally important for companies to build and maintain successful brand images. Thus, the next logical question to ask is what is a successful brand image?

Many scholars have attempted to capture the essence of the term "brand image" in a definition. De Chernatony and McDonald (1998) defined a successful brand as "an identifiable product, service, person, or place augmented in such a way that the buyer or user perceives relevant, unique added values which match their needs most closely. Its success results from being able to sustain these added values against competitors" (as quoted in McDonald and Christopher [2003] p. 214). McDonald and Christopher (2003) decided that successful brands must meet certain criteria:

- A successful brand has a name, symbol or design (or some combination of these) that identifies the "product" of an organization as having a sustainable competitive advantage [for example: a certain product has added services and is easier to buy or use than another].
- A successful brand invariably results in superior profit and market performance.
- Brands are only assets if they have a sustainable competitive advantage.
- Like other assets, brands depreciate without further investment (p. 200).

They go on to say that a brand's image or "personality" is a combination of sensual appeal (the way it looks, feels, sounds, smells, tastes), rational appeal (the way it performs, how cost efficient it is), and emotional appeal (psychological rewards it offers, moods it conjures up, associations it evokes) (pp. 205-206).

Brands can also be explained based on their elements—"those trademarkable devices that serve to identify and differentiate the brand (e.g., brand names, logos, symbols, characters, slogans, jingles, and packages)" (Keller, 2002,

p. 157). Successful brands are distinguished by their memorability, meaningfulness, aesthetic appeal, transferability both within and across product categories as well as across geographical and cultural boundaries and market segments, adaptability and flexibility over time, and legal and competitive protectability and defensibility (Keller, 2002).

Brands are important not only because of how they reflect on an organization as a whole but also because of the wide-ranging effects they have on market share, price, communication, and middlemen. Keller (2002) identified some of the major effects of successful brands. A successful brand can increase consumer confidence and purchase intention and mitigate any potential negative trail experience. This can lead to a greater market share and even a higher relative price. Successful brands tend to command larger price differences and are more immune to price increases than little known or unsuccessful brands. A successful brand can demonstrate a “halo” effect in that positive consumer feelings toward the brand itself can go so far as to positively bias consumer evaluation of brand advertising. Familiar, solidly established brands are able to withstand competitive advertisements better than unfamiliar brands. Finally, successful brands have a higher chance of gaining shelf space because stores striving to convey a high quality image are more likely to feature well-known, respected brands.

Organizations project brand images through all available channels to give them the most exposure possible. The World Wide Web’s tremendous span makes it one of the most effective channels through which to project a brand image.

### *Brand Image and the World Wide Web*

In today’s electronic society, no organization can afford to overlook the World Wide Web as a means of projecting a brand’s image to countless publics. “What people think of your company as a whole, and of your products and services by extension, will depend more and more on how they are treated online,” predicts Sterne (2001, p.72), author of *World Wide Web Marketing*. According to Hine (2001), organizations produce websites as a means of self-presentation, as an opportunity to be seen by a global audience, and in order to maintain a presence on the World Wide Web so as not to be outdone by competitors.

Considering the tremendous amount of growth and popularity the World Wide Web has enjoyed in its relatively short life span, surprisingly little research has looked into the ways organizations build brand images through their websites. As our world continues to shrink thanks to improved electronic communication channels, more and more emphasis will be placed on how well organizations can utilize those channels for their own benefit.

One organization leading the way in brand image development and projection via the World Wide Web is the Walt Disney Corporation. The massive popularity of past Disney movies and related products attests to Disney’s successful brand imaging. To better reach large audiences, Disney has chosen to launch its newest invention—the “Magical Gatherings” vacation planning service—through its website (in addition to TV and magazines).

### *Disney and the “Magical Gatherings” Brand Image*

The Walt Disney Corporation began with cartoonist Walt Disney. On July 17, 1955, after many years of work in the animation business, Walt opened Disneyland—“a place where ‘age relives fond memories of the past and youth may savor the challenge and promise of the future’,” according to Disney (WDW College Program brochure, pp. 2-3). In 1971, Disney opened an even larger theme park in Florida—Walt Disney World. Today, the park spreads across 30,000 acres and employs over 35,000 people. Walt Disney World has grown from the original Magic Kingdom park to include EPCOT (Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow), Disney-MGM Studios, Animal Kingdom, Pleasure Island, Disney Marketplace, two water parks, and numerous hotels, resorts, and convention facilities ([www.familytravelguides.com](http://www.familytravelguides.com)).

In October 2003, the Walt Disney Company launched “Magical Gatherings,” a vacation planning service especially designed for larger groups of family and friends. The service includes do-it-yourself vacation planning kits, a website offering vacations personalized for a variety of interests, and toll-free numbers connected to Disney vacation planner cast members ([www.disneyworld.disney.go.com/wdw/special/magicalgatherings.com](http://www.disneyworld.disney.go.com/wdw/special/magicalgatherings.com)).

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The number of studies concerning any aspect of the Disney Corporation is limited, as mentioned previously, and research concerning the Disney image or the brand image of a Disney product is practically non-existent. The Disney studies mentioned earlier spotlight certain aspects or products of the Disney organization, but none look at the actual brand image Disney is trying to project and how it sets about putting together and projecting that positive image. Although much research has been conducted about brand images in general, few have opted to deconstruct a

particular brand image in order to learn what, exactly, makes up a successful brand image. This information would provide valuable brand image-building tools for all organizations and would help to solidify the specific criteria of a successful brand image. Therefore, the following research questions are posed:

**RQ1:** What messages does Disney send its publics through its “Magical Gatherings” website?

**RQ2:** How do these messages build a successful brand image for “Magical Gatherings”?

## METHOD

Qualitative research was used to answer the research questions posed in this study. The nature of this particular research is formative, requiring a research paradigm that allowed the researcher to begin with rather broad ideas and then gather research to develop more specific theories. As Morse (1991) states: “Characteristics of a qualitative research problem are: (a) the concept is ‘immature’ due to a conspicuous lack of theory and previous research; (b) a notion that the available theory may be inaccurate, inappropriate, incorrect, or biased; (c) a need exists to explore and describe the phenomena and to develop theory, or (d) the nature of the phenomena may not be suited to quantitative measures” (p. 120).

The purpose of this research was to identify the messages embedded in the “Magical Gatherings” website and compare those messages to the current criteria of a successful brand image. As a result of this, the researcher discovered what specific messages and techniques the Disney Corporation used to successfully build a brand image for “Magical Gatherings.”

### *Procedures*

For Research Question 1, the “Magical Gatherings” home page and all related links were broken down into their component messages. Each page of the website was looked at individually and all portions of the page (including pictures, graphics, and wording) were included in the compilation of messages.

For Research Question 2, a Constant Comparative Analysis of the website messages was conducted (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The messages were highlighted and then sorted based on similarity. From these combined messages, the researcher categorized the messages to determine what types of messages Disney was using to build the “Magical Gatherings” brand image.

### *Data Analysis*

Brand image-building techniques were discovered by comparing the messages with the components of a successful brand image based on the research of Haedrich (1993). A successful brand image should (1) highlight success factors, including outstanding product quality, a high degree of innovation, an exceptionally efficient sales force, highly attractive advertising, or a particularly favorable price; (2) control disturbing factors such as situative, economic, and social factors that could inhibit audiences from actually purchasing/supporting a product or brand; and (3) make reference to a strong corporate image. Through Constant Comparative Analysis, these components of a successful brand image became the basis of the compilation and organization of the messages identified within the “Magical Gatherings” website.

In Phase 1 of data analysis, the messages were arranged according to how they fit into Haedrich’s three criteria of brand image. In Phase 2 of data analysis, the researcher identified emergent themes within the three criteria to determine more specifically how Disney fulfilled the requirements of successful brand imaging.

## RESULTS

The results presented emerged as categories during Phase 2 of data analysis. These categories, worded as descriptive statements about the Magical Gatherings brand, represent the underlying themes communicated through the product website and answer the questions that ground this research project. Table one identifies the categories that emerged in this analysis.

**Table 1.** Emergent Categories of Messages within the Magical Gatherings website

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1. A Magical Gatherings vacation is a way of purging one's guilt about not spending more time with loved ones
  2. Buy, buy, buy
  3. The Most Magical Site on the World Wide Web
  4. Only the best for our guests
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*A Magical Gatherings vacation is a way of purging one's guilt about not spending more time with loved ones.*

Reasons why a Magical Gatherings vacation is right for any family were plentiful throughout the site. Pictures of smiling families eating ice cream together under the EPCOT ball or riding bicycles along a boardwalk illustrated Disney as the ideal place to play and have fun with one's family and friends. The pictures were accompanied by captions spotlighting the importance of taking a vacation at Disney World with loved ones. For example, one caption stated: "This year, the Walt Disney World Resort celebrates Magical Gatherings experiences—the special occasions that occur when you come together with friends and family in a place of enchantment to share old memories and make new ones. There's never been a better time to plan your dream Walt Disney World Resort vacation. And now you can share the magic with those that mean the most to you." Another caption emphasized Disney's appropriateness as a vacation destination: "For larger traveling parties, we recommend experiences that can be enjoyed together, without having to separate or split up. The rides, shows and entertainment options are appropriate for all ages and are well-suited to be shared. The dining selections feature restaurants that cater to larger parties. And the recreational recommendations are comprised of fun activities that encourage everyone to participate together."

Another way the website touted its suitability for large groups of vacationers was through specialized vacation packages for "kids," "big kids," "teens," "active people," "couples," and "character lovers." Attractions, entertainment, dining, recreation, and additional activities for every preference were categorized for easy viewing. This allowed a visitor to mix and match vacation activities for a personalized vacation that everyone in the family could enjoy.

The Magical Gatherings vacation planning guide was another feature of the website. This easy-to-follow planning template allowed users to simply follow prompts and fill in blanks to plan the "perfect" vacation for their groups.

Based on the messages and artifacts included in the Magical Gatherings website, it is logical to assume that the website was designed to showcase how a Magical Gatherings vacation can solve three major situations—(1) today's families and friends are growing apart, (2) the world is a dangerous place full of inappropriate advertising, music, and entertainment, and (3) time with loved ones is precious and occurs too infrequently. The guilt a consumer might be feeling about one or all of these situations seems easily purged with a Magical Gatherings vacation in Walt Disney World.

#### *Buy, Buy, Buy*

Examples of cost muting and selective ambiguity were plentiful in the Magical Gatherings website. Overall cost and individual prices were never mentioned. Of the twenty-one pages analyzed, only five made any mention of costs in the form of vacation packages, booking tickets and making reservations, or showing restaurant and dining cost levels (though not actual prices). More emphasis was given to the special discounts and rates given to larger groups of vacationers traveling as part of a Magical Gathering, including merchandise, lodging, and dining deals. The site encouraged users to follow "recommendations" for what types of tickets and packages to purchase.

The entire planning and buying process is seamless and so simple that one could almost forget any money has changed hands. Tickets and reservations are booked through a step-by-step template that includes reminders and suggestions for vacation "extras" such as character dining experiences, room upgrades, and others. Overall, the website focused so much on the other aspects of a Disney World vacation, including magic, characters, attractions, and resorts, that it was easy to forget about the costs in all the excitement of planning a vacation.

#### *The Most Magical Site on the World Wide Web*

The presence of Disney fairy tale magic was a lesser theme throughout the website. Pictures of fairy tale characters and Cinderella's Castle were scattered liberally throughout the site. Tinkerbell and pixie dust guided

users through the online vacation planning guide while the mouse arrow was “magically transformed” into a magic wand.

Captions and text also proclaimed the magic of Disney. An excerpt from the Magical Gatherings homepage stated: “Discover a magical place with four exciting Theme Parks and two incredible Water Parks. Experience a world as big as your imagination, where fantasy comes to life and vacations always end happily ever after.” This statement, and others like it in the website, equated a family vacation at Disney World with a fairy tale full of memories made with loved ones.

By latching on to the Disney name, the Magical Gatherings brand automatically assumed the characteristics of anything associated with Disney, such as “magical,” “fun,” “excellent,” and “quality.” These mentions of the Disney name bring back memories for people who have vacationed at Disney World before and get first-time visitors excited about all there is to see and do at Disney World.

### *Only the Best for Our Guests*

Another theme, although less prominent, was that the Disney Magical Gatherings website could be considered the best vacation planning website on the Internet. The site was comprehensive, covering every aspect of a vacation and offering customer support at every step in the vacation-planning process—either through information already on the website or through a vacation planner cast member standing by on the other end of a toll free number. The major aspects of a Disney vacation (dining, attractions, entertainment, recreation, and additional activities) were covered as well as smaller details a user might not even think about unless they were highlighted (what attractions are not operating, calendar of special events, festival schedule, dining locator, tips for Disney travelers). “Guest-immionials” (thirty-second video clips of families telling about their Disney vacations), colorful pictures and graphics, and dazzling descriptions of shows and attractions gave visitors a sneak preview of what a Disney vacation could be like.

## **DISCUSSION/CONCLUSIONS**

Within the Magical Gatherings website, Disney has not only met, but exceeded Haedrich’s (1993) three criteria of a successful brand image. In meeting Haedrich’s first criteria of outstanding product quality, a high degree of innovation, an exceptionally efficient sales force, highly attractive advertising, or a particularly favorable price, Disney presented the Magical Gatherings vacation planning service in a beautifully designed website that showcased the product’s ability to design a vacation for any preference. Specialized vacation packages, glowing descriptions and pictures of Disney attractions, and a step-by-step planning guide showed users a gold standard in quality vacations and support services. The website seemed to “cast a spell” on visitors, refusing to let them go until they have admitted how much they need and want a Disney vacation and have begun planning one. Although a Magical Gatherings vacation may be one of the costliest in the world, little mention is made of exact prices anywhere in the website. This cost muting diverts visitors’ attention away from the fact that a Disney vacation has a less-than-favorable price and focuses their attention on how wonderful, unique, and unforgettable a Disney vacation is.

To meet the second criteria of controlling disturbing factors such as situative, economic, and social factors that could inhibit audiences from actually purchasing/supporting a product or brand, Disney emphasized the inclusiveness and all-encompassing characteristics of a Magical Gatherings vacation. A Disney vacation offers something for every age and taste and all in a safe, fairy tale environment. This responds directly to the two biggest arguments against taking a vacation—(1) it is impossible to please everyone and (2) you cannot escape how scary and dirty our world has become. Thus Disney is able to control the situative and social factors affecting its customers’ decisions. Disney also controls the economic factor of planning a Magical Gatherings vacation by rarely mentioning cost directly, offering a wide selection of discount packages, and providing almost-too-easy, fill-in-the-blank ticket and reservation forms.

Thirdly, the Magical Gatherings website meets the criteria of referring to a strong corporate image by prominently displaying the Disney name on every page, showing many pictures of Disney World, and using words made famous by Disney, including “magic,” “fairy tale,” and “dreams.” This tie-in to the corporate Disney image puts the Magical Gatherings vacation planning service head-and-shoulders above its competition before visitors even realize what an amazing product it is in its own right.

Brand images are perhaps the number one concern of organizations because they are what a potential customer relies on in making purchasing and supporting decisions. Past research into what makes up a successful brand image has uncovered numerous relationships, interdependencies, and variables. However, very little research has dared to classify what exactly constitutes a successful brand image in language that can be useful to organizations. This research has begun to define the criteria of a successful brand image and, in the process, has shown the Magical

Gatherings vacation planning service to be an excellent and innovative example of what a brand image should be. The researcher hopes that this endeavor may be followed by many others that aim to dissect successful products in the hopes of discovering and sharing their secrets.

## LIMITATIONS

Although carefully done, this research does have a few limitations. First, the research was rather narrow in that only the Magical Gatherings website was analyzed. However, because of the sheer size of the Walt Disney corporate website, the researcher felt it best to focus more closely on a smaller portion of the website in order to reach more concrete conclusions. Second, the research results and discussion are somewhat biased because they were filtered through only one coder's frame of reference.

Despite its limitations, this research has uncovered a wealth of information about how successful brand images are created and maintained. A successful brand image reflects well onto an organization and gives it further credibility and respect. It sets the product apart from and even ahead of the competition. Also, a successful brand image may even go so far as to persuade consumers to spend their money on a higher priced product. However, if Disney has taught us one thing, it is that a successful brand image—and even a successful corporate image, for that matter—requires time, research, creativity, and above all, an undying devotion to excellence in every way.

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