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THE POWER OF EMOTIONAL CONNECTION IN DRIVING BRAND GROWTH

By **Ed Dacanay**
Kantar Philippines



Does economic pressure turn brand loyalty into price sensitivity—or into reassurance seeking?

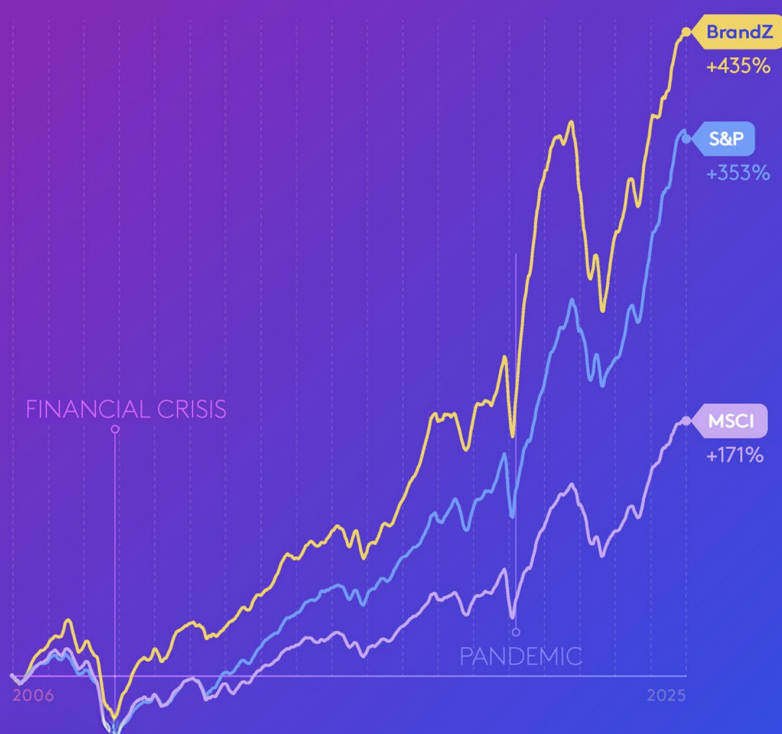
Many organizations prioritize short-term marketing objectives, often questioning whether investment in brand building detracts from annual targets. This framing creates a false trade-off. Brand building and short-term performance are not opposing forces.

When executed well, brand building indirectly but meaningfully contributes to business performance. It shapes how people feel about a brand, influencing consideration, choice, and loyalty in ways that activation alone cannot. At the core of this impact is emotional connection — not as a creative add-on, but as a fundamental driver of sustainable brand growth. Importantly, this emotional foundation becomes even more valuable in periods of economic uncertainty, when consumers simplify choices and gravitate toward brands that feel instinctively right rather than merely affordable.

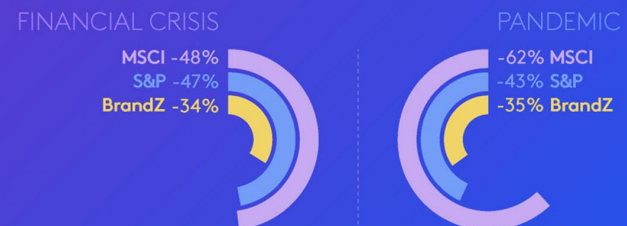


Strong Brands Withstand Economic Downturns

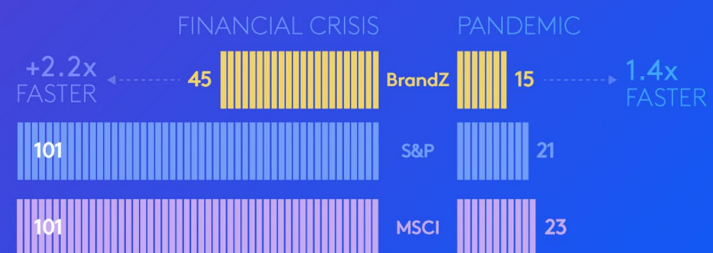
Kantar BrandZ portfolio vs S&P 500 vs MSCI World Index



% loss of portfolio value after major market shocks



Weeks to baseline recovery post-crisis



Kantar BrandZ's global database shows that brands are a company's most valuable asset. Strong brands hold up better in tough times: while MSCI and S&P dropped nearly 50% in both the financial crisis and pandemic, strong brands declined only about a third. They also recover faster — strong brands rebounded twice as quickly after the financial crisis and 1.4 times faster post-pandemic.

Difference as a Growth Engine

Brands form mental associations in people’s minds. When these associations are strong, they encourage repeat purchase and can support price premiums. Kantar’s Meaningful, Different, and Salient framework captures this by measuring how well brands meet functional and emotional needs, achieve mental availability, and stand apart from competitors.

Among these dimensions, Difference plays a disproportionate role in driving growth. Analysis of brands tracked over several years shows that those which gained market share typically started with stronger Difference scores than Meaningful or Salient (see Figure 2). These brands were more likely to grow once their unique qualities became clearly recognized and communicated.

Over-performance of growing brands on brand equity pillars

(Versus expected levels of growth for size of brand)

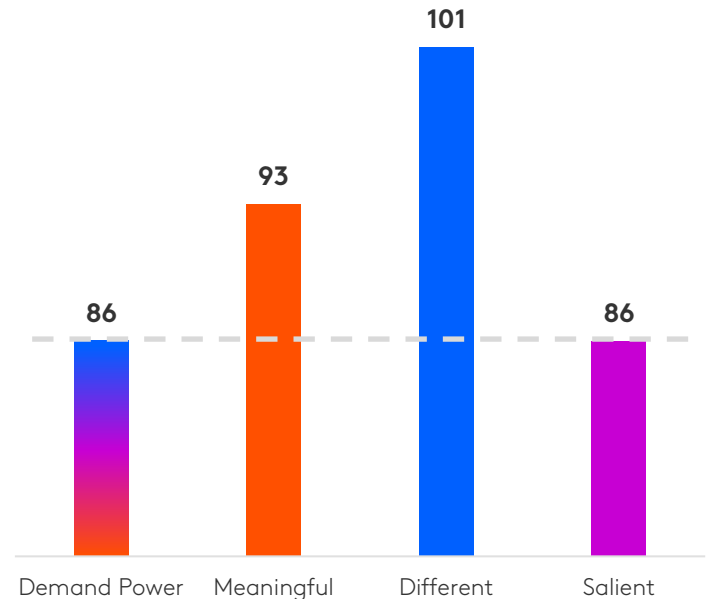


Figure 2 Source: BrandZ database, 1313 brand cases

Emotional Connection: The Hardest Difference to Replicate

Brands can build difference in many ways — through challenging category conventions, creating distinctive assets, or delivering superior functional benefits. Yet one route remains consistently difficult to copy: building clear and enduring emotional connections with consumers (see Figure 3). Emotional meaning anchors difference in memory, influencing choice even as functional advantages narrow and competitors proliferate.

This matters because most brands fail here. In a crowded marketplace, the majority of brand messaging still focuses heavily on functional features. While functional excellence is important, it is increasingly easy for competitors to match. Without emotional meaning, brands risk blending into a sea of sameness.

Four leading strategies to build difference:

CATEGORY LEADERSHIP

Setting the trends and challenging the status quo.

FUNCTIONAL BENEFITS

Superior qualities that can help to set them apart from others.

DISTINCTIVENESS

A highly distinctive look and feel and a suite of assets to reinforce this.

EMOTIVE CLARITY

Building clear and strong emotional connections with consumers.

Figure 3 Source: BrandZ database, 11,000 brand cases

Difference Index

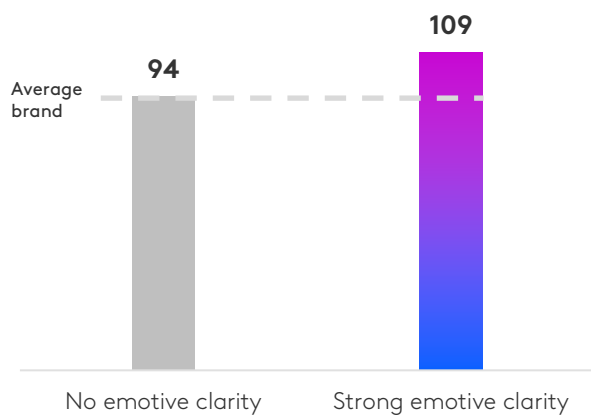


Figure 4 Source: Kantar BrandZ database 2000-2024

The BrandZ database shows that brands with strong emotive clarity — reinforced through their actions, communications, and experiences over time — drive Difference (see Figure 4). That’s because emotive clarity creates an emotional bond: consumers recognize the brand’s significance, see how it fits into their everyday routines, and experience genuine feelings towards it. Without this emotional connection, however, a brand’s difference risks becoming superficial rather than delivering real commercial impact.

This kind of clarity can help protect brands from becoming interchangeable especially during times of economic pressure, supporting continued choice even as categories experience downtrading or softening consumption.

When Emotion Becomes Identity A Brand That Stands Apart

A prime example of this is Red Horse.

In 2023, it was ranked #28 among Southeast Asian brands in BrandZ. The brand’s consistent and clear communication strategy over the years has established a distinctive brand personality.

Using the Kantar NeedScope framework, Red Horse’s typology is determined to land on a distinct emotive positioning resembling boldness and independence (see Figure 5).

One of its key platforms is *MuzikLaban*, an annual rock band competition supporting unsigned and independent musicians. Through this initiative, the brand has played a provocative role in transforming the music scene with its edgy and raw energy.

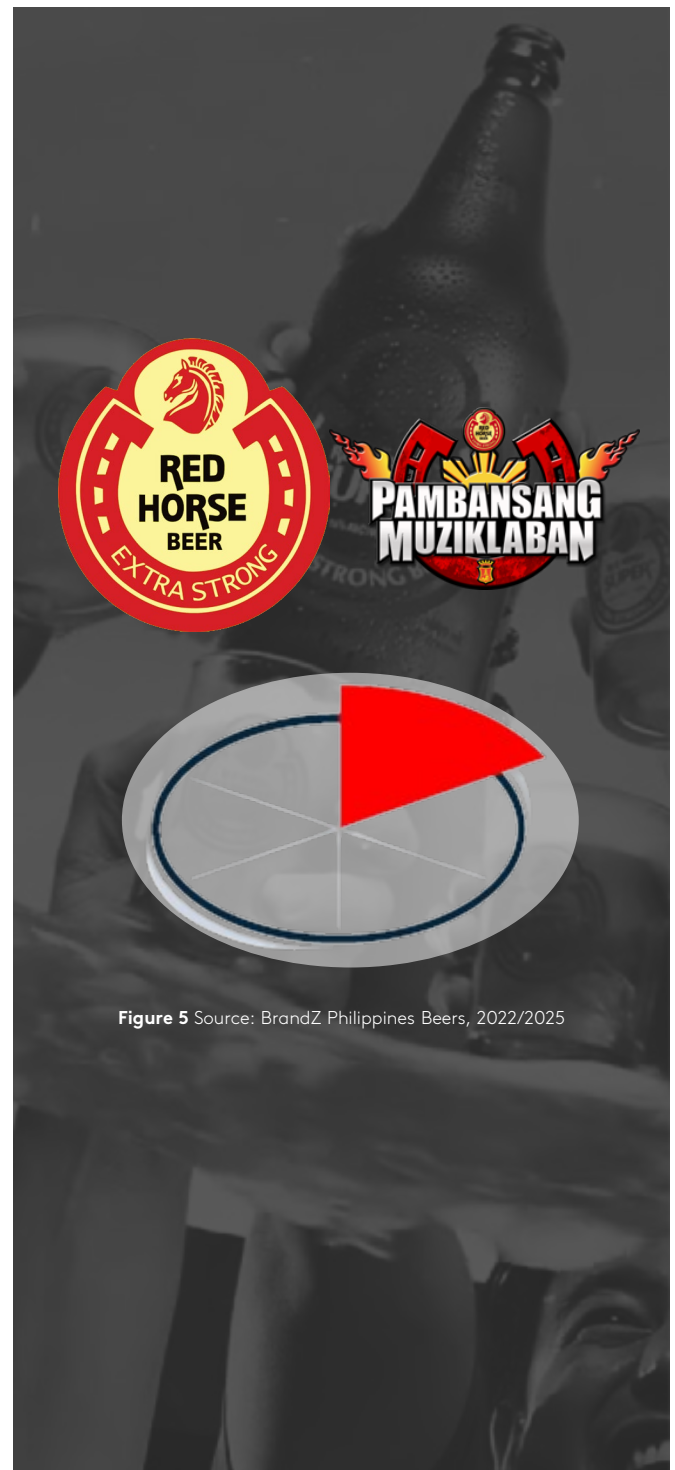


Figure 5 Source: BrandZ Philippines Beers, 2022/2025

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Recent brand communications have also highlighted attributes such as boldness, strength, and energy, effectively embodying a spirit of fearless defiance in the face of contemporary challenges.



Figure 6 Source: Using Needscope AI on selected assets

This consistent approach to messaging and execution sets Red Horse apart in a competitive market. Even during periods when alcohol consumption came under pressure — such as during the COVID-19 pandemic — Red Horse’s clear emotive distinction likely helped mitigate sharper declines by giving consumers a reason to continue choosing the brand beyond purely functional or situational drivers.

The brand was not simply competing on alcohol content or availability, but on a clearly defined identity that consumers recognized and aligned with.



In fact, very few brands manage to carve such a sharp and consistent image as Red Horse.

Within BrandZ’s database of over 8,500 brands, a striking 85% fail to form a genuine emotional connection with consumers.

This helps explain why brands with strong emotive clarity are often better positioned to recover post-crisis as well — because when conditions stabilize, they are already embedded in memory and do not need to reintroduce themselves to regain preference.

Three Steps Marketers Can Take to Build Emotion Into Their Brands



1

Choose the Right Emotion for Your Brand

Anchor brand positioning in a core emotion that resonates deeply with the audience and provides a clear basis for differentiation.

2

Ladder Up the Benefits

Ensure that product features, visual identity, and brand platforms consistently reinforce the chosen emotion, creating multiple, coherent touchpoints.

3

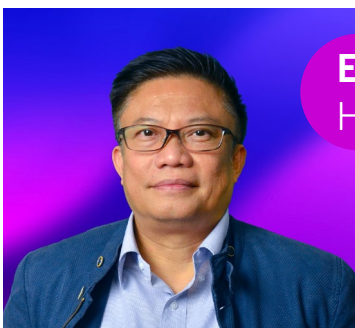
Execute Consistently

Sustained, aligned execution across all touchpoints is essential to maintaining difference and building long-term memory structures.

In Summary

Emotional branding isn't merely creative — it's strategic. By choosing the right emotion, embedding it across the brand, and executing with discipline, marketers can build deeper connections that drive enduring growth.

When markets tighten, this emotional clarity helps the brand stay relevant to consumers. When conditions get better, it sets the stage for rapid recovery.



Ed Dacanay
Head of Brand Strategy

For a deeper discussion on how emotive clarity drives enduring brand strength, feel free to reach out to me:

Ed.Dacanay@kantar.com