Interbrand
Growing Brands in Southeast Asia 2018
We surveyed 152 brand decision-makers of medium-to-large companies in Singapore, Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines, to find out more about how they are managing their brands, and the challenges and opportunities they face.
Southeast Asia is transforming in remarkable ways. Driven by emerging technologies, changing consumer behaviours, and economic integration, we are seeing new opportunities to engage and connect in one of the world’s most diverse and dynamic markets. A critical way to turn this change into growth is to develop and invest in building a strong brand. To deepen our understanding of how brand contributes to business growth in this current climate, we surveyed 152 brand decision-makers of medium-to-large companies in Singapore, Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines, to find out more about how they are managing their brands, and the challenges and opportunities they face.

This study shares some of our key findings, as well as actionable insights on successfully growing your brand and business in the region.

1. Embrace regional integration but never take a one-size-fits-all approach

Overall, the sentiment amongst brand decision-makers in the region is positive. Ninety-three per cent believe that integration through the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), formally launched in 2015, has had a positive impact on their businesses. They believe they will continue to benefit from access to a larger market and that there are new ideas and innovation opportunities to tap into as they expand.

For example, Nick Nash, Group President at Sea—an internet company based in Singapore (one of seven unicorns in the region valued at over USD $1 billion)—says, “One of the real nuances—frankly, one of our opportunities—is to figure out how to tailor products and price points and unique selling propositions, country-by-country, to give people the very best that technology can offer, but at a price point that makes sense for everyday budgets.” Sea has a distinct advantage in Southeast Asia, as the company employs over 5,000 people across seven key markets in the region. “Having that ground presence in every single one of our major countries gives us a degree of dialogue, empathy, intuition, and intimacy with customers that’s very special,” adds Nash. Its e-commerce platform, Shopee, is tailored for local buyers and sellers (in relevant local languages such as Bahasa and Thai), and universally underpinned by an easy, secure, fast, and mobile experience.
Companies across Southeast Asia are going to have to shift their focus from selling products to managing their brands as they enter new markets, engage new consumers, and tackle new competition.

Companies are traditionally focused on their home markets. However, building a strong bank of local insights is crucial to break budgets. There are many online communities and alternative research tools available that can facilitate a quick understanding of specific markets and give you a pulse on the ground. For example, we recently conducted digital ethnographic research for a bank in the Philippines to observe how consumers are using different apps to conduct everyday tasks, and how their needs are changing. Similarly, many of our clients are investing in crowd sourcing and social media watching in order to tap into people’s evolving behaviours. Insights can come from many channels, and need to be looked at holistically.

With strong insights we have the foundation to develop go-to-market strategies that both connect to a singular brand promise, but also work hard to position and differentiate the offering in a highly relevant and contextual manner.

2. Make digital a seamless part of your customer experience

According to a recent report co-authored by Google and Temasek, Southeast Asia’s internet economy reached USD $50 billion in 2017, and has the potential to exceed USD $200 billion by 2025. The report also stated how users in Southeast Asia are incredibly engaged online, spending an average of 3.6 hours per day on mobile internet, more than any other region in the world. It is not surprising, therefore, that brand decision-makers in the region strongly believe digital is critical to engagement, and 78 per cent believe social media and disruptive platforms will help them engage better across Southeast Asian markets.

Success also means prioritising customer touchpoints in a way that reflects changing customer behaviours, and taking into account how they use digital channels and make purchase decisions. For example, we recently engaged millennials in the region to understand how they bank, and what would facilitate a more positive savings experience. We discovered that they feel a lack of empowerment and control when it comes to their finances, something that mobile apps can go a long way to remedy through reinforcing messages and rewards.

3. Build your brand from the inside out

Ultimately, it’s the people inside the organisation who build brands that resonate in the real world. It’s why 60 per cent of brand decision-makers we surveyed are focused on acquiring and retaining talent to further drive growth.

Technology allows companies to create proximity, but implementing it without the brand as a filter misses an opportunity to create a powerful connection.

From change to growth in Southeast Asia

In summary, to grow your brand and business in the region, key areas to focus on include developing localised go-to-market strategies, building a differentiated and branded customer experience, and investing in people to grow from the inside out. When executed well, the link between brand building and business growth will never seem clearer. For more on these topics, and guidance on building your marketing capabilities and strengthening your regional teams, see further articles in our Growing Brands in Southeast Asia series.

84% Believe increased competition is the greatest challenge

This means companies across Southeast Asia are going to have to shift their focus from selling products to managing their brands as they enter new markets, engage new consumers, and tackle new competition.

Building and managing a brand in this ecosystem is not easy. Indeed, 52 per cent of organisations surveyed foresee challenges in understanding the changing needs of consumers across AEC markets.

78% Believe social media helps engage consumers

Yet while they recognise this, they are also struggling to deliver experiences that are immersive, real-time, and in line with their brand strategy. Many organisations in the region are still hierarchical in nature, built around processes and policies that can slow down decision-making and limit the effectiveness of their efforts. There is also not enough sustained commitment in the region overall, to regular customer experience mapping and analysis by touchpoint to determine pain points and where to prioritise resources and investment. Only when we have this in place can we be more strategic in identifying where we are driving satisfaction, loyalty, advocacy and ultimately which signature experiences are most critical.

52% Forsee challenges in understanding consumers

60% Believe retaining talent encourages growth

However, it is becoming increasingly difficult for many companies to engage, attract, and retain the people they want. Southeast Asian millennials entering the workforce (like their counterparts the world over) are most attracted to tech companies and organisations with an authentic sense of purpose and an identifiable set of values. As a result, many companies are reassessing their employer brands to identify how they can better connect with and engage existing and potential employees. They are investing in more vibrant workplaces, offering more flexibility in how people work and interact, and most importantly, signalling change through the ways their leaders talk about the business and what they stand for.

Another example is Traveloka, from Indonesia. Traveloka is an online travel company that has tailored the booking interface for ASEAN customers, offering local knowledge and travel insights. A recent report on the company’s regional growth in Digital News Asia stated:

With its four new SEA markets, Traveloka has more than 1,000 full- and part-time employees in the region. When asked how Traveloka plans to win over each Southeast Asian market, Head of Marketing Danis Muhamad said they would pay close attention to customer behaviour in each country, using the data collected to give clients a better experience. The company would also specialise in localising their offerings. “Traveloka expanded to Vietnam and Thailand and we use the local languages. We are determined to do so in every country that we want to enter,” he explained, noting that the company is also trying to cater to different dialects in the same language.

However, it is not just tech-driven brands that are capitalising on growth in Southeast Asia and developing tailored go-to-market strategies. Leading regional business conglomerates, such as SCG in Thailand, are adopting a pan-ASEAN strategy and increasing investment in the region to deliver value-added products and services that address the needs of customers. ASEAN countries other than Thailand provide 23 per cent of SCG’s total corporate sales and should continue to grow along with regional infrastructure needs.

Embracing integration comes with a recognition that the competition is going to increase. 84 per cent of brand decision-makers see increased competition as the biggest hurdle to overcome, a real challenge for domestic players traditionally focused on their home markets.

Believe retaining talent encourages growth

Purpose drives people in, and aligns those inside of the organisation while driving momentum outside of it. Tech companies in the region such as GO-JEK and Grab are desirable employers because they appear to offer a more dynamic workplace that aligns with millennial values. For example, GO-JEK, Indonesia’s first unicorn that offers transportation, delivery, lifestyle, and payment services, defines itself as “A technology company with a social mission to improve the welfare and livelihoods of workers in various informal sectors in Indonesia.” GO-JEK champions three essential values: speed, innovation, and social impact. Similarly, Grab’s goal is to make Southeast Asia a better place by providing universal access to transportation. This philosophy extends to its drivers, called “partners,” whose lives it seeks to improve by providing opportunities, training, and a sense of family.

Sixty per cent of millennials seek employers with a clear purpose, according to Deloitte’s 2015 Millennial Survey. Purpose draws people in, and aligns those inside of the organisation while driving momentum outside of it. Tech companies in the region such as GO-JEK and Grab are desirable employers because they appear to offer a more dynamic workplace that aligns with millennial values. For example, GO-JEK, Indonesia’s first unicorn that offers transportation, delivery, lifestyle, and payment services, defines itself as “A technology company with a social mission to improve the welfare and livelihoods of workers in various informal sectors in Indonesia.” GO-JEK champions three essential values: speed, innovation, and social impact. Similarly, Grab’s goal is to make Southeast Asia a better place by providing universal access to transportation. This philosophy extends to its drivers, called “partners,” whose lives it seeks to improve by providing opportunities, training, and a sense of family.

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Operationalising brands for optimal growth

Yirong Tan
Consultant

Today, the conversations we have with Chief Marketing Officers (CMOs) are no longer just about strengthening the marketing capabilities of their organisations. For brands to fully tap into growth opportunities across Southeast Asia, CMOs need to transform their marketing functions to be nimble, flexible, and responsive.

Why? Because the 152 brand decision-makers we surveyed across the region highlighted these as their top three challenges in growing their brands:

(i) Understanding changing needs of customers across markets
(ii) Creating a consistent customer experience across different languages
(iii) Reducing the complexity of managing the brand across multiple markets

For brands to fully tap into growth opportunities across Southeast Asia, CMOs need to transform their marketing functions to be nimble, flexible, and responsive.

Navigating these challenges requires brands to approach capability-building differently. More than putting in place the right people, platforms, and processes, brands need to design for freedom within a framework. And digital will be key to unlocking this.

Drawing on our experience working with clients in the region, we have identified three imperatives for Southeast Asian organisations seeking to transform their marketing teams.

1. A single view of the customer

One of the biggest concerns our clients have is ensuring a consistent and seamless customer experience, not just across touchpoints, but across the multiple Southeast Asian markets they operate in. However, what is particularly revealing is that only a few of them have an ear to the ground, and not many of them are organising their marketing teams by customer segments. They do it by channels, resulting in siloed teams, duplicated efforts, and no single integrated view of the customer.

The reality today is that customers expect conversations to start in one channel, and to be picked up seamlessly when they engage through another. By creating teams built around individual customer segments, brands are now better able to consolidate customer insights, observe and smoothen the customer journey, and build relevant experiences around their priority touchpoints. This would also give brands the opportunity to align product development, customer insights, and customer service teams to similar segments, creating customer-focused ecosystems within the organisation.

And this is where digital comes in handy. Having teams on the same digital platform with a systematised way of collating, categorising, and retrieving relevant customer insights, and integrating these with existing CRM data, will be critical in ensuring the effectiveness and feasibility of having teams organised by customer segments.


Imagine this: a customer makes a complaint on Facebook, and for the brand in question, it kick-starts a convoluted process of verification and approvals before a reply is posted a day later. If this sounds familiar, you are not alone. We see this often with our regional clients. In part, this is due to the way these organisations and their approval processes are structured: hierarchical, with control concentrated at the top.

The marketing function needs to evolve from one that is about compliance and execution, to one that is nimble and responsive. And this requires empowered teams, streamlined processes and dynamic structures that can flex according to the situation at hand.

The biggest difficulty our Southeast Asian clients face is in empowering their teams. Part of the reason is a highly deferential culture. The other part is a lack of relevant knowledge and skills. Empowerment is dependent on a culture of trust, and is only feasible when employees have absolute clarity and a common understanding of what is on-brand (and off). This necessitates extensive training of marketing teams, often across geographies and markets. However, a solution we are increasingly implementing is working closely with marketing teams and app developers to create scalable, game-based digital learning tools that will not only help close knowledge and skills gaps, but more importantly expose and socialise marketers with the brand’s personality and communication style. Great for team-building, an added bonus is that learning becomes intuitive, interactive, and especially relevant for millennial hires.

(i) A framework to determine where to prioritise to drive growth and improve brand and business performance
(ii) A strategic roadmap that enables the right allocation of money and resources to the right areas, aligning all business and brand activities
(iii) A data dashboard that is dynamic to aid focused activation


The norm for organisations is to set KPIs and allocate budgets a year in advance. This might have worked at a time when companies were tracking KPIs in yearly satisfaction surveys and financial performance. However, in a digital age where we have a suite of tools that enable real-time KPI tracking, the opportunity lies in transforming data into useful, actionable insights that can guide where our marketing dollars should be invested.

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There is no one-size-fits-all approach to developing an agile and responsive marketing function. It’s why we work with our clients to first conduct an initial growth assessment, and why so much of our work involves creating specific solutions to fit our clients’ business models, meet their needs, and get them on a path to growth.
Achieving growth by optimising customer experiences

With the formal introduction of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) in 2015, a huge, untapped market opportunity was born: one comprised of over 622 million people and worth USD $2.6 trillion. The increased openness of the world’s seventh largest economy means the needs and sophistication of this high-growth region are changing rapidly. We are now seeing a middle class rising up in many Southeast Asian countries, and with it, an appreciation for quality over price, and a desire for meaningful experiences. The leading companies in the region are alive to the evolving needs of their customers across Southeast Asian markets, and are leveraging their brands to create stronger, more relevant customer experiences.

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Success at building better experiences across products, services, communications, and environments will be determined by a business’s ability to draw on its brand and respond to three key challenges:

1. Reaching—and engaging—a highly fragmented set of customers

Minimal “how to” information exists around market entry in this region. And with such a diverse range of laws and regulations, stages of economic development, distribution systems, and cultural and societal norms, it is difficult to create a reliable databank. Leveraging digital technologies and analytics is paramount to success. Armed with deep insights into each country’s cultural nuances and demand-drivers, businesses can create awareness of products and services, locking in loyalty from customers—both current and future.

But to truly be successful, brands in the region must use data in meaningful ways, uncovering rich insights into diverse customer groups, and using those insights to create value and immensely personalised experiences through their offerings. Only if brands can connect insights to real people will they be able to drive choice, quality, and growth. In short, big data today must be translated into empathy, intuition, and meaning.

We see several brands mastering insight-driven analytics today, including one of Interbrand’s 2017 Breakthrough Brands, Sea. When asked how this internet company has realised success in Southeast Asia so quickly, Group President Nick Nash said: “The uniqueness of Greater Southeast Asia, its geography, distinctness from other parts of the world, incredible local nuance, differences in tastes and perceptions and regional dialects, have always been formidable challenges...[we have] an intimacy with the customer, a localised workforce, and a technology infrastructure country-by-country that’s pretty difficult for other people to recreate.”

Given the shift towards highly customised experiences for customers across the region, brands looking to enter this region should make reaching them a key business priority.

2. Creating coherent experiences across a diverse marketplace

It’s clear Southeast Asia is not a monolithic market—businesses looking to succeed here must not implement a one-size-fits-all approach. However, as touchpoints proliferate and markets become increasingly complex, consistent brand-building is what will increase awareness over time. Therefore, brands here face the imminent challenge of creating hyper-local experiences that are nonetheless always on-brand.

The word to remember here? Experience. Because before a brand can succeed, it must first determine how it wants its customers to feel. Of course, the way in which a brand interacts with its customers may differ across markets, but at the heart of these interactions are very clearly connected, coherent elements, guided by what we at Interbrand call experience principles. Translating strategy into activation, a brand’s experience principles inform the evolution or creation of all its touchpoints, from visual to written, by uniformly clarifying the desired responses from people who interact with it. Experience principles elevate a brand’s thinking, helping it to develop a more holistic vision that turns theory into practice: articulating every nook and cranny of the organisation, and bringing together people, places, processes, and technology for maximum effect.

A brand that really knows where the rubber meets the road is Grab, the Malaysian-origin ride-sharing app that has since launched private car, taxi partner, shuttle, bus, bike, and social carpooling services. With different availability in each of its eight markets, Grab’s experience remains the same: seamless, enjoyable transportation and always-on support throughout the region. Across promotional materials, customer service emails, website navigation, and recruitment ads, Grab’s experience of seamlessness and support comes through clearly as the driver behind its business.

CEO Anthony Tan says it best: “At the end of the day, our experience comes down to this simple equation: Happy Drivers + Happy Passengers = Happy Grabbers.”

3. Standing out against competitors in this “move now” market

The last (but certainly not the least) important challenge for businesses looking to succeed in Southeast Asia is standing out in this fiercely competitive market. According to a 2015 Accenture study, by 2020, consumer spending will double to $2.3 trillion a year in ASEAN, with over $770 billion of new money coming from the nearly 100 million people joining the consumer class for the first time, creating mounting pressure for businesses to engage customers in this region now.

But incredible pressure comes with incredible opportunity: this growing share of spenders is choosing brands and products as we speak, and their loyalty could last a lifetime. The best way to build loyalty? Integrate the digital and physical, the online and the mobile, the humans and the bots. Create an immersive experience that surrounds the customer.

The best way to do this successfully is to truly understand the journey your customers take with your brand. This is where experience mapping, or the strategic process of capturing complex customer interactions, comes into play. Experience mapping not only builds knowledge and alignment across your organisation, but helps build seamless customer experiences, too. And for a brand to maintain a truly intimate understanding of its consumer, customer journey mapping and segmentation must be done in tandem. Once a brand has a thorough understanding of its experience map, its customer base can be divided into specific and relevant targets in order to understand both purchase and post-purchase behaviours. Why? Because only then can brands anticipate future consumer decisions—and, most importantly, turn them into advocates.

Lazada, one of Singapore’s best-known brands and a leading e-commerce platform, continues to thrive across the region, in part due to its commitment to understanding customer journey maps and creating immersive experiences that represent that journey. The brand continues to bring its mission of creating effortless, simple, and direct shopping experiences for customers in Southeast Asia to life in its most recent venture: omni-channel retailing. Lazada’s new “Click and Collect” lounges across Singapore allow users to shop online and collect their goods in CapitaLand stores. In addition to collection lockers, these are spaces in which visitors can try on clothing and test products. By bringing together digital and physical touchpoints, Lazada is better positioned to maximise reach and increase market share.

Developing an authentic and differentiated story like Lazada’s, and translating that story into an immersive experience can empower your brand to engage audiences in creative and fun ways, ones that will capture the attention and devotion of your customers—for years to come.

Translating strategy into activation, a brand’s experience principles inform the evolution or creation of all its touchpoints.
Winning the war for talent in Southeast Asia

Nitin Das Rai
Senior Consultant

At Interbrand, we believe that the best brands are built from the inside out, made by people and delivered to them. This belief implies that employees are critical to an organisation’s success. It is a conviction backed by our research: 60 per cent of the 152 brand decision-makers we surveyed view acquiring and retaining talent as a critical growth driver in Southeast Asia.

So how do you win the war for talent in a region that has traditionally been characterised by a relatively small talent pool? By increased worker mobility (with the formation of the ASEAN Economic Community) and a world in which millennials instinctively choose technology companies and trendy startups instead of traditional corporations?

To succeed today, brands need to make their brand promise relevant to not only a wide group of external stakeholders, but also to potential and current employees.

1. Prioritise employer branding

The formation of the ASEAN Economic Community has only intensified the region’s war for talent, and employer branding has become a critical differentiator in recruiting in Southeast Asia. Because to succeed today, brands need to make their brand promise relevant to not only a wide group of external stakeholders, but also to potential and current employees. This entails making clear exactly what they stand to gain from the organisation, the critical role they play in delivering the brand, and how the brand is a foundation for their long-term growth and success. Also important is to ensure that the external recruitment story (to attract talent) and the internal brand story (to retain and motivate employees) are fully aligned.

Working with Interbrand, BDO—the Philippines’ largest bank—invested in a comprehensive employer branding programme in 2015. “We recognised that sustaining the brand proposition ‘We Find Ways’ was key, especially with the turnovers, and the growth and expansion of the business across markets and geographic location,” said Nestor Tan, Director, President, and Chief Executive Officer at BDO Unibank. Viewing its employees as priority stakeholders, BDO mapped their journeys and audited their experiences. It understood what drove them, and what influenced their actions and behaviours. The insights led to a compelling employer brand platform, from which BDO activated multiple initiatives to embed the “We Find Ways” service proposition into the company’s culture. From an employee value proposition to an internal engagement campaign; from a socialisation app to digital outreach; from signature experiences to on-brand work spaces, BDO created a vibrant, winning employer brand. Active today, it clearly articulates the employees’ role in BDO’s success—and what they stand to gain from successfully delivering “We Find Ways.” To BDO, the benefits of a strong employer brand remains clear, and continues to reap rich results.

2. Align marketing and HR

Mike Rocha, Interbrand’s Director of Global Valuation, points out that, “Given how important employees are to delivering a strong and positive brand experience to customers, collaboration between marketing and HR is essential.” Unfortunately, our experience in the region is that these functions are typically siloed, with ad hoc collaboration the norm. But to win the war on talent, alignment between marketing and HR is critical. From recruiting to KPIs, from training to culture, marketing and HR must be two sides of the same coin. Greater collaboration will lead to a more united organisation, a more responsive culture, and ultimately, a better brand experience.

The customer experience is a reflection of how well marketing and HR are aligned, and in many ways, of what is transpiring inside an organisation. In particular, a lack of alignment of internal behaviours tends to lead to an inconsistent customer experience.

“We focused on the customer experiences we wanted to nurture and then worked with Interbrand to highlight the internal behaviours that brought BDO’s brand proposition to life.”

Nestor Tan
CEO, President, Director, BDO Unibank Inc.

BDO saw the value in creating a set of behaviours and actions, with their marketing and HR teams working in sync to craft EVPs, activate on-brand behaviours, and linking brand to KPIs.

3. Connect and inspire with purpose

Our experience with Southeast Asian millennials entering the workforce, is that they are most attracted to not just the biggest or the richest organisations, but to ones who operate with a strong sense of purpose and an identifiable set of values. They seek brands that speak to their sense of self. Brands that can translate their values into meaningful behaviours, and inspire rising talent with a larger cause will find their fuel for growth in Southeast Asia.

Jonathan Bernstein, Interbrand Singapore’s Managing Director, adds, “It is an effective tactic used by leading Thai companies like Siam Commercial Bank (SCB) and Bank of Ayudhya, who have made social benefit a core part of who they are and what they stand for. As these banks have begun to expand into the adjacent markets of Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, having a purpose-driven proposition becomes a powerful recruitment and retention tool. One that not only differentiates the brand, but connects with younger demographics through its relevance and authenticity.”

The impact of an inspiring, purposeful brand can be phenomenal. “More than a cultural aspiration,” says Nestor Tan, “our employees genuinely practice ‘We Find Ways’ to help our customers. They’re engaged and are proud to work for BDO, always going the extra mile to ensure that customers receive the best overall banking experience, and deliver better results for all stakeholders.”

An undisputed industry leader, BDO today maintains a strong first or second market share position in almost every major product category of significance. A winner of multiple “best place to work” awards, it is the only Philippine financial institution to be named in the 2017 Top 50 of Forbes’ Best Employers in the world.

By adopting these three key recommendations, we believe that you too can significantly enhance the role your brand plays in attracting the best and brightest in an increasingly competitive Southeast Asia—and drive your brand’s growth.
At Interbrand, we believe that growth is an outcome of a clear strategy and exceptional customer experiences, enabled by world-class capabilities. That’s what we deliver through a combination of strategy, creativity, and technology that helps drive growth for our clients’ brands and businesses.

With a network of 21 offices in 17 countries, Interbrand is the leading global brand consultancy, the publisher of the highly influential annual Best Global Brands and Interbrand Breakthrough Brands reports, and Webby Award-winning brandchannel.

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