



Introduction

Branding constellations are applications of systems constellations. They enable brand decision makers to test intuitively whether opportunities under consideration should become realities. Poorly assessed changes cost companies a lot of money such as Kodak's 1975 decision not to market its digital camera, Campbell Soup 1984 stopping its *M'm! M'm! Good!* jingle, Nike's 1998 short-term change of its *Just Do It* slogan to *I Can*, the 2000 Mastercard logo update from  to , the 2014 *Google Glass* introduction, and (maybe) Musk's 2023 *Twitter* conversion to *X*. In my view, *bad branding decisions* often involve 'misplaced' brand, organizational, and/or personal loyalties in decisions makers' gut feelings, contrasting their subconsciously processed information.

I hold a master's degree in Econometrics and candidate's degree in Psychology. My fascination with branding constellations originated in 1999. At that time, I had my own branding company and was working part-time at the Open University of the Netherlands where I was invited to pursue a PhD. My teaching areas included implementation and change management, marketing, project management, and research. I had read Hellinger's *Love's Hidden Symmetry* (1998) and enjoyed several family and organizational constellations. The constellation notion resonated with my own *bodily wisdom discovery* as soccer coach: When I literally placed players in a planned team formation in the dressing room, their nonverbal reactions toward one another showed which relationships would function smoothly and which needed attention.

As Ursula Franke was conducting a psychotherapeutic PhD on family constellations, the opportunity arose to direct my PhD at transferring knowledge from the psychotherapeutic domain to the branding field. Yet, acknowledging that therapeutic decision effects are predominantly personal, while branding ones affect many stakeholders. My PhD focused on individual brand decision makers (in short *branders*) rather than branding teams. It concentrated on the spatial applications with stand-ins to enable studying the constellation perceptions of brand experts. Hence, a key concern was the legitimacy of branders' implicit notions surfacing in public settings. Therefore, I excluded branders and advisors from competing brands from workshops. Furthermore, potential visitors had to agree on confidentiality. All constellations were videotaped to create a transparent research process. In 2010, I completed my PhD, as illustrated in Display 1.



Display 1. Cover PhD Thesis (2010)

At the request of the dean of the management faculty, I also involved students in my PhD project. Their focus was on *reliability* as many brand experts present at the PhD workshops especially questioned if similar results would be reached with different stand-ins and/or other brand team members. Between 2001 to 2015, I supervised fifty-two master's theses on branding constellations. In 2000, I started my training on family and organization constellations. I also experienced many leading international and Dutch facilitators on both kinds of constellations. Between then and today, I facilitated hundreds of constellations. From 2019 on, I have my own *Branding Constellation Training* in groups of a maximum of five, including client reports and reflections on their facilitations using video recordings. Here, constellations are part of *projects*, including the implementation process. Currently, twenty-two facilitators have been trained by me.

This chapter focuses on the physical stand-in form of branding constellations. First, I introduce the "brand" and "branding" concepts, followed by the "brand systems perspective." Next, I address three brand research methods that relate closely to constellation work: soft systems methodology, lateral marketing, and projection techniques. Then, my main research results are presented as well as their implications. I conclude with key differences between my approach to guiding constellations and common practices in organizational constellation work. This chapter closes with a branding constellation example.



1. Brands

Products become *brands* once they grow familiar to people, evoking expectations that their producers cannot ignore (Jurg 2010, p.32). The ultimate step is that brands guide their fans to the future. These brands are cultural icons and very valuable. According to Interbrand's 2025 ranking, Apple is the world's most valued brand estimated at 471 billion dollars. The marketing decisions that branders make to enhance the brand's value are called *branding* (Jurg 2010, p.37). *Decisions* are choices of what to do or not to do (Baron 2004, p.6). They originate in sensory impressions (Hill 2003, p.1). Hence, I employ branding constellations to facilitate branding decision making generally using the question: 'How can decision X contribute positively to the development of brand Y?', illustrated in Display 1.



Display 1. Constellation question: How can decision X contribute positively to the development of brand Y?

2. New Coke story

Making sound decisions on marketing activities is difficult as both branders and their fans generally subconsciously process the information received and are therefore unable to articulate it (Hill 2003, p.1). One of my favorite stories to illustrate this difficulty is the *New Coke story* (Jurg 2010, p.22). April 23, 1985, the Coca-Cola Company decided to replace its nearly century-old flagship product with *New Coke* to halt its declining market share due to the successful *Pepsi challenge*: a promotion that invited people to taste both Pepsi and Coca-Cola blindfolded. *The Best Just Got Better* as its advertisement ran, shown in Display 2.



Display 2. Coca-Cola's *The-Best-Just-Got-Better* reaction to *Pepsi challenge* promotion

Coke's change of taste decision was initiated by The Company's new marketing director Sergio Zyman, coming from Pepsi. It was supported by two years of research, costing four million dollars. However, Coke drinkers immediately demanded their original drink back. Due to slogans like *The Original*, *Always Coca-Cola*, and *The Real Thing*, the last word fans connected with their Coke was "New." Moreover, safeguarding a "secret formula" in a vault for nearly a century does not align with changing a taste. On July 11, 1985, the original formula was re-introduced under the name *Coca-Cola Classic*. In my view, Zyman still 'loyally' played on the Pepsi battlefield, overlooking what Coke represented. Thus, checking branding decisions under consideration requires a systems perspective.

3. Branding systems

Branding systems are sets of interrelated brand elements in which the condition and behavior of the whole cannot be traced back to properties of individual elements (Jurg 2010, p.23). Systems theory distinguishes two kinds of approaches: the *real system notion* where branding systems should be examined externally and objectively, and the *metaphoric conception* from which they should be seen as a way of thinking to stimulate branders' creativity. I see branding systems as metaphors, and more specifically as *organism metaphors*: brand-elements-as-persons. A constellation embodies the elements that are relevant to the brander's decision under consideration (p.38).



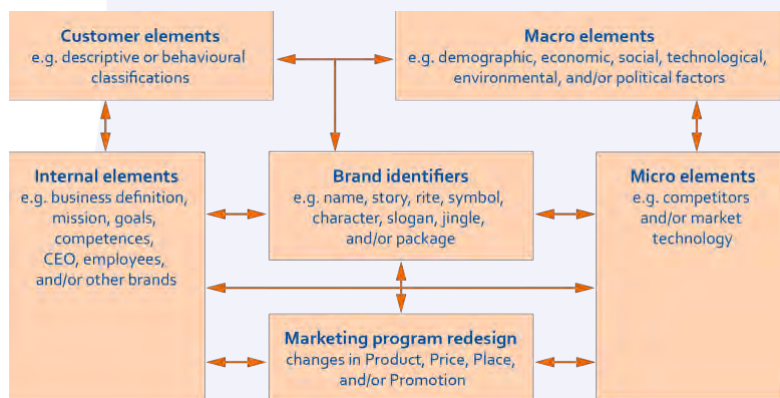
Hence, key to the branding systems approach is the specification of the elements needed to answer the question 'How can decision X contribute positively to the development of brand Y?', illustrated in Display 3.



Display 3. Identification issue of branding system elements

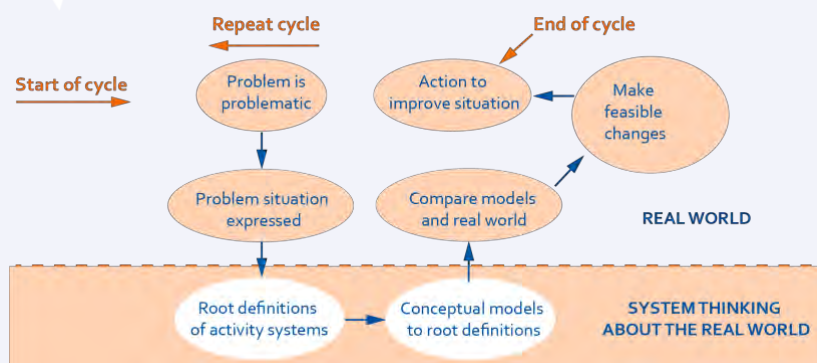
4. Branding elements

I differentiate controllable and uncontrollable branding elements (Jurg 2010, p.50). *Uncontrollable branding elements* are factors that branders cannot directly influence but nonetheless affect the brand. My PhD identified four categories: customers and the internal, micro- and macro-environment. *Controllable elements*, by contrast, can be shaped by branders: brand identifiers and the marketing program. *Brand identifiers* are basics such as names, logos, and slogans. The *marketing program* is commonly viewed through the 4P-framework: Product, Price, Place, and Promotion. Display 4 presents the model that I employ to select the elements needed to predict effects of the branding decision considered.



Display 4. Branding model from a systems perspective (redesigned from Jurg 2010, p.50)

Next, this chapter goes into three well-developed brand research methods that make constellation processes familiar for branders. Next to that, these three methods offer great opportunities to enrich constellation work: soft systems methodology, lateral marketing, and projection techniques.



Display 5. Seven-stage model of the soft systems methodology (redesigned from Presley et al. 2000, p.382)



5. Soft systems methodology

Display 5 presents the seven-stage model of the soft systems methodology (Jurg 2010, p.64). SSM approaches human decision problems from a systems perspective, offering a structured approach. It has been criticized for underestimating the role of emotions in decision making due to its reliance on mind mapping in developing branders' conceptual models. Hence, I transform its cognitive process to an emotional approach by employing constellations. Display 6 presents my constellation stages, following the SSM process.

Seven SSM stages	Explanations
1. <i>Recognize current branding as problematic</i>	A brander feels a mismatch between the existing brand identity and the changing internal and/or external circumstances
2. <i>Express problem situation</i>	S/he articulates the brand mismatch in relation to these changing conditions and defines a potential branding decision to address it
3. <i>Identify and define root definitions</i>	S/he specifies the brand elements that play a key role in understanding the potential effects of the branding decision under consideration
4. <i>Develop conceptual models</i>	S/he constructs and updates her/his brand model based on the relationships among the brand elements as revealed by the constellation
5. <i>Compare models and real-world</i>	S/he translates the emergent patterns from the constellation into implications for real-world branding practice
6. <i>Make feasible changes</i>	S/he operationalizes the branding decision to contribute to the brand development
7. <i>Act to improve the situation or repeat cycle</i>	S/he executes the branding decision as operationalized, or, if needed, restart the soft systems process.

Display 6. SSM branding constellation process (based on Presley et al. 2000, p.382)

Once a brander feels to have a problem (*stage 1*), my constellation preparation starts by articulating it (*stage 2*), defining a decision to address it, and specifying key elements from Display 4 (*stage 3*). Next, their current models are provoked and updated by the embodied metaphors emerging in the constellation (*stage 4*). Then, we have a dialogue on my presentation of their emergent model, resulting in a report on the decision's contribution to the brand's development and the bycatches (*stage 5*). Finally, s/he operationalizes the decision considered and takes a go or no-go decision (stages 6 and 7).

6. Lateral marketing

Lateral marketing involves creating a new opportunity from a logical system of concepts (Jurg 2010, p.59). For instance, the short-lifetime situation of flowers might lead from the logical concepts of "flower" and "die" to the opportunity "a flower that does not die": the artificial flower, presented in Display 7.



Display 7. Lateral marketing process: from 'flowers' and 'die' to the 'artificial flower'

Lateral marketing is an application of De Bono's (1970) lateral thinking, designed to stimulate decision makers to escape from rigid perception patterns established by previous experiences (Jurg 2010, p.59). Key is to tolerate ambiguity and reason productively within it. To De Bono (1970, p.225), the notion of 'truth' blocks creative thinking by bordering it within the binary boundaries "YES" and "NO." He encourages people to move beyond this dichotomy through "Provocative Operations" (POs): deliberate disruptions of boxed thoughts. Building on lateral marketing, I employ constellations to enable branders in creating conscious connections among concepts, based on their subconsciously processed information.



Display 8. Duck-rabbit figure (redesigned from Chambers and Reisberg 1985, p.320)

7. Projection techniques

Display 8 illustrates how our mind deals with *ambiguous perceptions*: we perceive either a duck or a rabbit (Chambers and Reisberg 1985, p. 320). Whether we see the figure as a *duck* (facing left) or as a *rabbit* (facing right) reveals as much about us as it does about this figure. Once we have identified one interpretation, it is difficult for us to see the alternative. Similarly, we cannot experience happiness and sadness at the same time, for example (*reciprocal inhibition*). Our perception is not as straightforward as we think it is.

Therefore, brand researchers employ ambiguous, emotional charged stimuli to explore underlying mental constructs by asking respondents to make sense of what they perceive; a technique known as *projection* (Jurg 2010, p.68). General forms are *personification*, in which participants imagine brands as persons like "If Nike were a person, would it be a male or a female?" and *personal analogy* where respondents are asked to identify with specific brand elements and are questioned on how these feel.

A specific variation is *Zaltman's Metaphorical Elicitation Technique* (ZMET), employing imagery to uncover symbolic meanings people attach to brands (Jurg 2010, p. 70). Typically, participants are asked to collect pictures that relate for them to a specific brand issue one to two weeks before the scheduled dialogue to activate their subconscious associations. During the dialogue with a researcher, the participant constructs a narrative that connects the selected images. Together, they then design an individual mind map based on the visual metaphors and explanations, combined by the researcher into a *collective consensus map*.

Building on ZMET, I start the dialogue with a brander on the decision considered and the elements needed one to two weeks before the constellation. After the constellation, we dialog on its *outcomes*, in which the configurations and statements of the stand-ins and witnesses are combined into a kind of collective consensus map. Finally, I provide a report of the results to the brander.

After describing how I enriched the constellation process by employing soft systems methodology, lateral marketing, and projection techniques, I address my main research results and their personal implications in terms of relevance, validity, and reliability. *Relevance* reflects the numbers and intensities of the *insights* (new notions) gained by branders, *validity* concerns the truth and completeness of these insights, and *reliability* their similarities under different circumstances.



8. Research results on relevance

Brander enjoy the depths and emotional intensities of the insights they gain, especially in combination with the show-don't-tell notion of constellation work. Beyond plausible answers to their questions, they report many *bycatches*: important emergent discoveries about their brand dynamics. Although branders often take time to implement their insights, they most vividly recall their experiences many years later, describing them as transformative moments for their brands and themselves. Branders state that already many insights emerged during the preparation dialogues. More and deeper insights are reported when stand-ins do not know which element they represent. In this *covert variation* unclarity for stand-ins of the lettering system appears crucial together with clarity for the branders like "P = brand Persona."



Branders seem to feel more accountable for outcomes and describe more insights when they have a broad choice on stand-ins, and when they select and place these themselves. They also report more insights when facilitators reposition stand-ins less than four times. Particularly effective is having branders take the place of a key systems dynamic element at the end of the constellation. Personal dialogues after the constellation increase insights too. Branders especially enjoy the personal presentation afterwards with key constellation images and open questions, as well as the written report with key pictures, a constellation story line, and a link to the video recording. They often share them with like-minded co-decision-makers. Dialogues on why or how constellations work only seem to distract branders from taking insights in, however.

Hence, I present the constellation to branders as a *projection technique* covering ambiguous stimuli enabling their minds to reveal subconsciously processed information and keep me to the relevance results described. A paradox is that although constellations are dialogical processes between branders and facilitators, every change must be executed by branders as they are the ones responsible for their brand's development.



9. Research results on validity

Branders are generally stunned by the truths that constellations reveal, sensing that constellations make effective use of their implicit information (*physical validity*). It appears, though, that their subconscious minds focus on implicit information that resonates with the disclosed dynamics (*interpretation bias*). Aligning their insights with empirical facts proves challenging as the constellation insights diverge too sharply from conventional research findings. Yet, all decisions based on constellation outcomes were considered successful by branders. This may partly be a *self-fulfilling prophecy*: deep emotional beliefs that decisions work attribute to their success. It might also indicate a *myside bias*: seeking signs in favor of a current belief as this creates more pleasant feelings than signals against it. To counter potential distortions, I take three to four weeks for the whole constellation process. A downside of the stunning disclosures in the company of strangers is that they make branders feel uncomfortable, avoiding later testing opportunities by constellations with stand-ins. Thus, another paradox comes out: Unexpected truths revealed today tend to reduce its future use. Therefore, I explicitly ask stand-ins to be very respectful in their statements and request their confidentiality when they register and right before the constellation in the presence of the brander.

In terms of completeness, involving more than seven elements tends to overload branders, while fewer elements enhance clarity. A further paradox emerges here: Striving for completeness reduces relevance. Therefore, I limit the number of elements to five or six. To disclose the key ones, all potential elements are dialogued, attentionally assessing brander's face expressions as well as differences between their verbal and non-verbal behaviors. The factors on which branders react most intensely are included. Often, *shadow elements* turn out to be important in the constellation: notions that are subconsciously pushed away in the preparation. When I notice this, I often use *process comments*: I step out of the dialogue and say something like "You seem to look puzzled when you name this potential element. Could you please associate on it?".



10. Research results on reliability

Stand-in statements seem more reliably affect-driven rather than cognitively motivated when the constellation session starts with affective, breathing exercises. Stand-ins tend to rely more on their emotions when they neither know the brander nor which element they represent as they do not know how to do 'well'. Here, another paradox lightens up: branders' insights are intensified by dialogues on their associations, while their expressions during constellations limit the purities of stand-ins. Hence, I delay these dialogues till after the constellations, asking branders to write down key connotations during the sessions.



What also enhances affect-driven stand-in reactions is that facilitators first take their time to focus on stand-ins' non-verbal behaviors in silence, before standing next to them to experience their emotions regarding the configuration from this stance, and turn to them in a 90-degrees angle for proper questioning. Addressing stand-ins by their personal names rather than by their letters also emerges to enhance their emotional purity. Often experienced stand-ins prefer a more *transpersonal* approach, being referred to as the letter they stand for. They often seem to underestimate the value of the happenings for their own lives. A paradox with experienced stand-ins is that they generally express emotions more clearly and intensely than lay ones, while branders often feel overwhelmed by their intensities. Therefore, I invite people with mixed constellation experiences. Furthermore, I paraphrase personal stand-in statements to letters using their key words and images; as a check on my proper understanding as well as to enrich the brander's association process.

Generally, constellation question insights shared by witnesses after the constellation align, while bycatches often appear to depend on their position (*perspective inconsistency*). From a projection perspective such shifts are logical consequences of presenting ambiguous emotional stimuli. Still, these shifts seem to enhance branders' capacities to tolerate ambiguity and make them more open for competing views, while still enabling them in reaching a form of closure to take sound decisions. Thus, I stimulate branders to change chairs regularly and experience each configuration from dissimilar perspectives.

The influence of facilitators on constellation developments proves significant: When two different facilitators separately guide a constellation for a different brand team member at the same time, their initial configurations are much more alike than the final ones. When two different team members have similar ideas on elements, their stand-in statements are generally in line. They often deviate when those members have different views as might be expected; for instance, in a brand manager's constellation "**B** (= Brand document)" was leading the configuration, while it appeared to be irrelevant in the logistics manager's one.



11. My constellation specifics

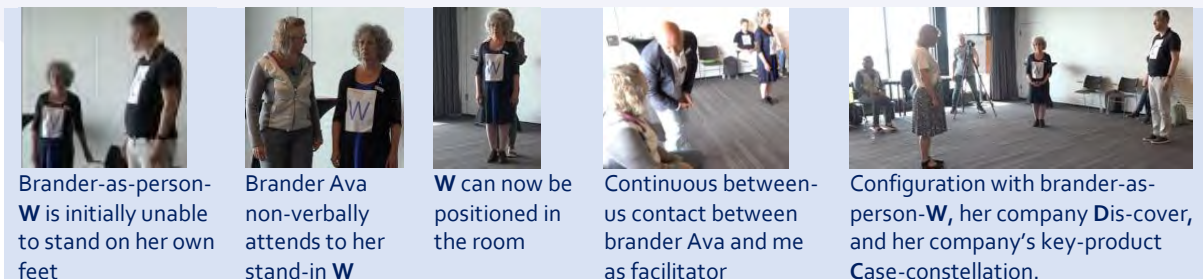
Next, I summarize sixteen key differences between my guidance of constellations and common practices in organizational constellation work with individual decision makers in the physical application with stand-ins.

1. Focus is on the clients' associations rather than the phenomenological truth of constellation happenings
2. Constellation question is: How can decision X contribute positively to development of organization Y?
3. Constellations cover three different moments in time: preparation, execution (session), and reflection
4. Preparation starts about one or two weeks prior to a constellation and is directed at clarifying the constellation question and the five or six elements to be set up
5. In big companies, first the focus is on internal decision effects; potentially followed by its external effects
6. Participants are asked for secrecy and respect, and managers and advisors from rival firms are excluded
7. Covert method is used, working with for clients logical lists of letters to facilitate their associations
8. Client selects and positions the stand-ins rather than stand-ins or the facilitator
9. Client is stimulated to change chairs frequently during the constellation
10. Stand-ins are addressed by personal names; and their statements paraphrased to branders using letters
11. Focus is on disclosing a good position for the decision element to optimize the final configuration
12. To the utmost two elements are repositioned to facilitate the client to see the way forward
13. Client is asked to personally take the position of a key systems dynamic element in the final configuration
14. Before the constellation question and the meanings of the letters are disclosed by the client, witnesses are asked to share their key experiences respectfully
15. After the meanings of the letters are disclosed, stand-ins and witnesses are asked to share their notions on the constellation question and the key bycatch for the client
16. Constellation happenings are presented to branders as emotional triggers in a dialogue after about one week and about one week later a constellation story report is provided including a link to video recording.



12. Branding constellation example

Due to confidentiality agreements and the complexity of the consent process, I cannot present a case of a well-known Dutch brand. However, I can display a permitted, anonymized example from a *personal brand*: someone who owns a company without personnel. Her first name is transformed to "Ava," her surname to "Williams," her company name to "Dis-cover," and her key product to "Case constellations." Ava combined her own company with being a psychiatric nurse. She wanted to know if her current congress stand design notions would work well for her company. The description is limited to the constellation's start, covering five key illustrations (Display 10) and its story line (Display 11). Ava's question was "How can the planned congress stand design contribute to the Dis-cover brand?"



Display 9. Branding constellation key illustrations example

Ava selects **C**(ase-constellation), **D**(is-cover-company) and "last but not least" (brander-as-person-)**W** from a group of twelve potential stand-ins. Once these three stand-ins have applied their identifying letters, I ask them to stand. As brander-as-person-**W** struggles to stand, I request **C**ase-constellation and **D**is-cover to sit down temporarily. Brander-as-person-**W** expresses that she "needs support from behind, which is almost impossible". Thus, I suggest that the brander stands attentively beside her personal stand-in **W**, before 'squeezing' in behind her. This procedure strengthens brander-person-**W**, enabling her to be positioned. Although still anxious, she gains stability and expresses that she is now ready to handle the positionings of the other two stand-ins. With **D**is-cover present, brander-as-person-**W** feels more grounded. **D**is-cover focuses on a rectangular she sees in front of her on the carpet. When **C**ase-constellation is positioned, the air conditioning is turned off, heightening the sensory awareness in the room. **C**ase-constellation is placed halfway on **D**is-cover's rectangular to her irritation, although he is "OK" for her. **C**ase-constellation feels sorry for his position, but really cares for brander-as-person-**W**. He sees his position as temporary until he can come closer to her. When **C**ase-constellation says that "C stands for Chocolate," this evokes laughter and relieves tension. This energy shift allows **C**ase-constellation to move closer to brander-as-person-**W**, which I ask him to do. When he steps off her 'carpet box,' **D**is-cover becomes able to see the others and be present.

Display 10. Branding constellation story line example

This constellation suggests that Ava will personally benefit from dealing with her anxiety to commit to her company. Presenting her personal brand playfully rather than in a clinically ordered pattern is expected to make it more present, which she had already planned to do for her congress stand. She might also consider using her personal name "Ava Williams" for her company rather than the current "Dis-cover." Furthermore, she may think of renaming her key product "Case constellation" to something like "Care constellation," and transfer her current company slogan 'Systemic work in healthcare' into a solution-oriented one like 'Careful discoveries,' linking them to both healthcare and compassion.

Many constellations reveal personal branders' anxieties to balance their own growth with customer demands. Moreover, their business development often conflicts with what is 'normal' within their families of origin. They often think that adopting a fantasy name reduces this tension, while this only covers-up underlying conflicts. Being a personal brand inevitably creates frictions. One's own genuine evolution does not directly align with customers' and family expectations. Constellations enable personal branders to experience these tensions and to deal with them, enabling them to turn their sound branding opportunities to realities.

Questions and/or comments are warmly welcomed to info@wimjurg.nl



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