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The industrial brand personality scale: Building strong business-to-business brands

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ABSTRACT

To remain distinct and build strong business relationships in a competitive business-to-business (B2B) environment, an increasing number of industrial marketers attempt to exploit the potential of branding. However, brand management in the industrial sector is still at its starting point. For this reason, the authors introduce the concept of brand personality to industrial markets. Based on a series of qualitative and quantitative studies, the authors develop and validate an Industrial Brand Personality Scale. Furthermore, they examine whether brand personality perception differences exist among different types of industrial transactions and among different members in the buying center. The analysis yields a framework for theoretical discussion and provides B2B managers with a tool to build strong B2B brands in an increasingly competitive industrial market.

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1. Introduction

Marlboro inevitably triggers the image of a cowboy in our minds: *adventurous*, *free,* and *cool*. Similarly, *Porsche* may well conjure up thoughts of an ambitious young man: *sporty, attractive,* and *high-income*. However, what comes to mind when we think of *SAP, General Electric*, or *Siemens*? While brand management has long been a central tenet of consumer marketing, these examples show that its systematic use is less established in industrial markets (Kim, Reid, Plank, & Dahlstrom, 1998; Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2007; Mudami, 2002; Mudami, Doyle, & Wong, 1997). Only recently has the increased competition in industrial markets – where service, reliability, and quality are now assumed minimum requirements rather than order-winning criteria – led to the fact that industrial firms pay more attention to the concept of branding (Humphreys & Williams, 1996; Zablah, Brown, & Donthu, 2010). In a highly competitive business environment, business-to-business (B2B) marketers are forced to successfully differentiate themselves by systematically steering their brands (Bendixen, Bukasa, & Abratt, 2004; Kotler, 1991).

Previous research on B2B branding has primarily focused on identifying differences between branding in consumer versus industrial contexts (e.g., Brown, Bellenger, & Johnston, 2007), applying branding strategies already successfully applied in other markets – usually consumer markets – in the industrial context (e.g., Kuhn, Alpert, & Pope, 2008), and developing new measurements of brand equity for the industrial context (e.g., Jensen & Klastrup, 2008). While this research provides valuable insights, it does not provide B2B marketers with a systematic approach to position their industrial brands away from competition. Furthermore, while previous research has noted that emotional brand benefit associations have become increasingly important in the predominantly “rational” and “problem-oriented” industrial markets as a means of differentiation (Bergstrom, Blumenthal, & Crothers, 2002; Gundlach, Achrol, & Mentzer, 1995; Lynch & de Chernatony, 2007), due to an increase in commoditization of industrial markets (Madden, Fehle, & Fournier, 2006; Schultz & Schultz, 2000), again no research exists that provides industrial marketers with a comprehensive set of relevant B2B brand value associations.

To help B2B marketers strategically develop a distinctive brand position, the concept of brand personality – defined as the “set of human characteristics associated with a brand” (Aaker, 1997, p. 347) – seems particularly fruitful. It provides a means to differentiation, offers both functional and emotional brand value associations, and encourages the customer to perceive the seller as an active, trustworthy partner (Johar, Sengupta, & Aaker, 2005; Ward, Goldstine, & Light, 1999).

Despite its value for B2B marketers, the concept of brand personality has only recently been examined in the industrial context. Campbell, Papania, Parent, and Cyr (2010) were the first to apply Aaker's (1997) well-established brand personality scale (BPS) in the industrial context to examine whether similarity in brand attributes affect the success of B2B relationships. Besides this notable exception, however, most research on brand personality has focused on consumer markets (Grohmann, 2009). Therefore, more research on brand personality is needed in the industrial context.

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This is all the more true as Aaker's (1997) BPS scale has been developed for consumer markets. The question arises, therefore, whether it can be applied to the measurement of brand personality for B2B brands, as industrial market transactions, in general, are significantly different from consumer market transactions. For example, industrial market transactions often involve multiperson(al) decision making bodies (i.e., buying centers; Mitchell, 1995), represent specific solutions to problems (Bendixen et al., 2004), involve high risk on the part of the buyer because of their scale (Kuhn et al., 2008), and require industrial firms to use components from well-respected suppliers to gain legitimacy and acceptance for their own goods (Mudami, 2002). Given this, it is possible that Aaker's (1997) scale needs to be adjusted to take the peculiar nature of industrial markets into account. Venable, Rose, Bush, and Gilbert's (2005) findings substantiate this reasoning. The authors found that Aaker's (1997) BPS was not encompassing enough when assessing brand personality in the non-profit context. Therefore, they complemented Aaker's (1997) BPS with the results of qualitative and quantitative studies and identified brand personality associations peculiar to the non-profit context.

Against this background, the primary objective of this article is the development and validation of an Industrial Brand Personality Scale (IBPS) that helps industrial marketers to systematically steer their brands. More concretely, we aim to extent research on both brand personality and industrial brand management by addressing the following research questions (RQs): Is Aaker's Brand Personality Scale able to fully capture brand personalities in industrial markets (RQ1)? If not, what are the characteristic dimensions of IBPs (RQ2)? Moreover, we aim to examine whether different types of IBPs exist among different types of industrial transactions (RQ3) and among different members in the buying center (RQ4)?

In the following, we begin by reviewing the relevant literature on industrial branding. Next, we develop and validate a brand personality scale for the industrial market on the basis of a series of qualitative and quantitative studies among B2B marketers. In this context, we also provide answers to the stated research questions. Finally, limitations, future research directions, and managerial implications are discussed.

2. Conceptual foundation

2.1. Business-to-business branding

In increasingly competitive markets, building strong B2B brands becomes a key success factor (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2007; Rooney, 1995). A brand is a "promise of the bundle of attributes that someone buys…" (Ambler & Styles, 1997, p.10). Therefore, a brand can be seen as a value proposition that promises to satisfy particular customer needs and wants (Merz, He, & Vargo, 2009; Vargo & Lusch, 2004, Tsai, 2005). A strong brand shifts the competitive framework in the firm's favor, giving it intangible value that is difficult to replicate. It serves as a means to both identification and differentiation thereby creating ongoing value for firms even in highly competitive and commoditized markets (Madden et al., 2006; Schultz & Schultz, 2000).

Research on B2B branding has substantiated the importance of branding and brands. The brand in this context usually refers to the corporate industrial brand, instead of the product or service level brand. As such, a buying center member's associations about an industrial brand can be viewed as a preliminary heuristic for deciding whether to become involved with the organization (Venable et al., 2005; Webb, Green, & Brashear, 2000). For example, previous research demonstrates that B2B branding enhances the success of industrial firms and makes them more competitive (Gordon, Calantone, & di Benedetto, 1993; Hutton, 1997; Michell, King, & Reast, 2001; Shipley & Howard, 1993). Furthermore, Sweeney (2002) demonstrates that B2B brands play a crucial influencing role at different stages in the industrial buyer's decision process, influencing the development of the supplier list, the shortlist of firms for negotiation, the signing of the purchase agreement, and the decision of supply and support services. Similarly, Mudami (2002) found that industrial buyers consider brand value in their purchase decisions and concluded that branding's role in B2B marketing is more important than has previously been acknowledged. Thus, branding in the B2B context is decisive (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2007).

2.2. Nature of industrial markets and B2B brand functions

Previous research has recognized that brand management in B2B markets differs from that in consumer markets (Bendixen et al., 2004; Brown et al., 2007; Gordon et al., 1993). This discussion has usually taken place on a broader level (i.e., across industries), instead of focusing on one particular industry. The reason for this is that industrial branding experts believe that brand concepts developed for the industrial market in general should be applicable to any B2B marketer irrespective of industry (e.g., Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2007). For example, Kuhn et al. (2008) find that Keller's customer-based brand equity concept needs to be revised for B2B markets. Similarly, Jensen and Klastrup (2008) empirically demonstrate that existing brand equity models have theoretic or validative problems in B2B markets and therefore propose an alternative brand equity model for B2B markets. Most importantly perhaps, researchers have suggested that the B2B brand functions might be different from those in consumer markets due to the peculiar nature of industrial markets.

To illustrate, supply and demand in industrial markets are represented by organizations rather than individual consumers (Hakansson, 1982). This means that multiperson(al) decision making bodies (i.e., buying centers) make purchase decisions, usually within a framework of formalized, protracted procurement processes (Mitchell, 1995). The members of such buying centers are typically highly qualified professionals who tend to make decisions supported by logical reasoning (Gilliland & Johnston, 1997). In addition, goods and services in the industrial sector represent solutions to problems and are intended to fulfill a concrete need. Thus, B2B brands primarily fulfill an information function, providing functional brand associations (Bendixen et al., 2004; Brown et al., 2007; Gordon et al., 1993).

Furthermore, transactions in industrial markets often involve high risk on the part of the buyer (Kuhn et al., 2008; Swait, Erdem, Louviere, & Dubelaar, 1993). This is because industrial market transactions are often substantial in their scale (Lynch & de Chernatony, 2007). A strong industrial brand can help minimize the perceived risk related to the selection of a wrong business partner (Qualls & Puto, 1989; Schmitz, 1995). Therefore, B2B brands also fulfill a risk reduction function. To reduce the buyers' perceived risk, industrial brands need to establish trust. Previous studies reveal that sellers can develop trustworthy relationships by establishing emotional connections with their buyers (Bergstrom et al., 2002; Lynch & de Chernatony, 2007; Wuyts, Verhoef, & Prins, 2009). Emotional connections help industrial firms differentiate themselves effectively in a widely "rational" business market (Abratt, 1986; Shaw, Giglierano, & Kallis, 1989; Thompson, Knox, & Mitchell, 1997). In fact, using emotional brand benefit associations has become increasingly important due to an increase in commoditization in the B2B environment (Madden et al., 2006; Schultz & Schultz, 2000). In such an environment, it is difficult for industrial sellers to differentiate themselves by means of purely functional benefits.

Finally, industrial firms are increasingly recognizing that using components from well-respected suppliers (e.g., Intel microprocessor) helps them gain legitimacy and acceptance for their own goods. Thus, self-expressive brand associations affect potential buyers' purchase decisions. The fact that organizational buying centers comprise of many individuals with differing levels of experience, motivation, and heterogeneous brand expectations substantiates the importance

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