



## Brands: Just for consumers? Introduction to the special issue on B2B branding

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### ABSTRACT

Although there is significant interest in branding in a B2C context substantially less research has been conducted in B2B marketing. The research in B2B marketing is somewhat fragmented and a research agenda to develop coherent models and provide guidance to practitioners is required. Despite the disjointed nature of the research in this area, B2B branding has been found to convey a number of benefits e.g. conferring uniqueness. This special issue consists of eleven papers covering a range of topics including brand alliances, brand personality, brand equity and brand relationships, brand identity, corporate branding and social media.

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Despite a significant interest in branding (Keller & Lehmann, 2006), and the predominance of branding in consumer markets, branding in industrial markets has received little attention from academics (Beverland, Napoli, & Lindgreen, 2007; Lynch & de Chernatony, 2007; van Riel, de Mortanges, & Streukens, 2005). B2B branding has long been perceived as being largely irrelevant to business markets (McDowell Mudambi, Doyle, & Wong, 1997). Although past research in B2B branding is somewhat fragmented, various studies have identified numerous benefits to organizations. For suppliers the benefits include improved perceptions of quality (Cretu & Brodie, 2007), conferring uniqueness (Michell, King, & Reast, 2001), enabling a premium price to be charged (Low & Blois, 2002; Ohnemus, 2009) and raising barriers to entry (Michell et al., 2001). B2B branding increases buyers' confidence in and satisfaction with their purchase decision (Low & Blois, 2002; Michell et al., 2001) and reduces their level of perceived risk and uncertainty (Bengtsson & Servais, 2005; Mudambi, 2002; Ohnemus, 2009). A few industrial organizations such as IBM, Cisco, Oracle and Intel, faced with the prospect of commoditization and increased lack of differentiation in their respective markets have deployed brand development strategies in an attempt to create a competitive advantage. This has led these B2B brands to be amongst the most valuable brands globally (Interbrand, 2010). However, despite its benefits being apparent branding is not widely used across B2B companies possibly due to the lack of cohesive academic theory. Without a significant body of research knowledge on the subject, B2B brand managers have very few frameworks to inform their practice and are eager for guidance. B2B branding is still in its infancy and there is a clear need for further research. Leek and Christodoulides (2011)

have developed a future agenda for research in B2B branding in six broad areas – the B2B brand concept, the decision making process, brand architecture, internal brand communication, brand relationships and brand equity.

This special issue of *Industrial Marketing Management* aims to begin addressing the imbalance of brand research in consumer versus industrial markets and contribute not only to answering the questions put forward in Leek and Christodoulides (2011) research agenda but also stimulate other pertinent research programmes to advance theory and help B2B managers grow their brands. Eleven papers spanning a range of topics including brand alliances, brand personality, brand equity and brand relationships, brand identity, corporate branding, social media and B2B brands have been selected.

The first three papers examine aspects of the brand concept as it applies in a B2B context by investigating brand identity, brand personality and brand relevance. The initial paper by Coleman, de Chernatony and Christodoulides builds on the concept of brand identity with a view to develop and validate a parsimonious multi-dimensional scale to measure B2B service brand identity. This diagnostic allows managers to manage their B2B service brand identity by closely monitoring consistent communications, brand personality, human resource initiatives, visual identity in addition to an employee and client focus. Researchers may also use this tool to empirically test the relationships between service brand identity and other nomological constructs. Herbst and Merz's paper looks at the applicability of Aaker's Brand Personality Scale in an industrial context. They develop a modified scale consisting of three broad dimensions namely, performance, credibility and sensation. The performance dimension relates to the functional brand associations. The credibility dimension confirms that industrial brands have to display trust to reduce risk. The sensation dimension reveals the usefulness of prestige in positioning a B2B brand. Herbst and Merz found that

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brands have a different focus depending on the type of transaction; transactional brands emphasise the performance dimension and are less credible, whereas for brands with a relational focus the two dimensions are perceived more equally. The sensation dimension received less emphasis across both types of transactions. In addition to the type of transaction affecting the perception of brands different members of the buying centre perceive brands differently. Backhaus, Steiner and Lügger investigate the drivers of brand relevance in a B2B context. Whilst in a B2C context brand relevance is driven by three functions, i.e. image benefits, information costs, and risk reductions, in a B2B context the study found that brand relevance was driven by risk and information cost-reducing effects. B2B companies need to bear these drivers in mind when investing in their brands. It was also found that brand relevance varies across product categories and therefore investment may or may not be a suitable strategy.

The next two papers shed light on the development of brand equity in different B2B sectors. The paper by Biedenbach, Bengtsson, and Wincent focuses on the creation of brand equity in the professional service context by developing and testing a structural equations model which includes variables to capture buyers' perceptions of employee behaviour. Through the data collected from 632 customers of one of the Big Four auditing companies in Sweden, Biedenbach et al. found that customer–employee rapport has a positive and significant effect on brand equity dimensions (perceived quality, brand associations and brand loyalty) whilst perceived role ambiguity and role overload negatively affect customer–employee rapport. Furthermore, role ambiguity and role overload were found to have a direct and negative effect on brand equity dimensions. The findings highlight the importance of employees in a B2B context. Ewing, Nyadzayo and Matanda develop a model of franchise based brand equity (FBBE) based on qualitative research. Within the framework brand relationship management (BRM) leads to brand citizenship behaviour (BCB) which in turn leads to FBBE. Franchisors need to effectively manage potential new relationships at the recruitment stage where they should employ franchisees whose values fit with those of the company. For existing relationships, franchisors need to maintain and align the brand values and support the franchisee. Effective BRM will lead to positive brand citizenship in franchises which consists of a number of dimensions i.e. helping behaviour, brand endorsement, brand enthusiasm, brand advancement, brand consideration, sportsmanship and self development. Positive BCB will enhance FBBE. The provision of a framework will help franchisors provide structured support to the franchisee and enable them to monitor the relationship in order to align both parties' brand values.

Leischnig and Enke examine the interrelationships between brand stability and consumers' responses in an industrial context and suggest a theoretical framework. Based on data from a survey, they demonstrate that brand stability reduces consumers' perceptions of risk. Brand stability increases consumers' purchase loyalty and attitudinal loyalty to a brand both directly and indirectly through risk reduction which encourages bonding between the supplier and the buyer. The willingness to pay a premium price is found to be influenced by purchase and attitudinal loyalty.

The next two papers examine the development and formation of industrial branding strategies. Sheikh and Lim focus their attention on an under-researched B2B context, which involved them investigating engineering consultants' views of corporate branding practices. Through 14 qualitative interviews with engineers undertaken in the UK arm of a multinational, engineering consultancy, the authors identified four themes B2B firms need to take into account when developing a corporate branding strategy. These are the significance of engineers' personal brands, the implications of incorporation, corporate branding conduct and technical expertise. The authors have developed propositions around each theme that subsequent research may wish to test. Vallaster and Lindgreen follow a case-study approach to yield insights into the formation of corporate brand strategy by focussing on internal and

external brand actors, their social interactions and the role of the situational context. Drawing on ideas from “strategy-as-practice” research Vallaster and Lindgreen view strategy as a multi-stakeholder process and undertake in-depth interviews within a European-based industrial organisation to explore the co-creation of brand strategy formation amongst different participants and the involvement of different actors in the branding process.

Mäläskä, Saraniemi and Tähtinen examine branding in a network and introduce the concept of the branding pool which refers to all the actors in an SME's network that participate in branding either directly or indirectly. Whilst traditionally branding is perceived as being internally governed, this paper examines the influence of various stakeholders within the network. Direct actions influence the brand in a way which is separate to the company's branding process. These actions may *inter alia* include creating WOM, co-promoting. Indirect actions bring about changes in how the actual company itself develops brands internally. These indirect actions include influencing the managerial decision making, providing feedback on the products/service etc. The concept of the branding pool enables companies to consider how stakeholders beyond the organization can influence branding and improve its performance in the market.

Social media have become increasingly popular over the last few years. The paper by Michaelidou, Siamagka and Christodoulides addresses the paucity of research on social media in a B2B context by focussing on the use of social networking sites, perceived barriers to use and metrics adopted by small and medium B2B brands. Over a quarter of their sample, consisting of SMEs from various B2B sectors, use social networking sites to achieve various brand objectives but primarily to attract new customers. Non-users of social networking sites claim the lack of relevance of social media for their respective industries as the most popular reason for not using them. Users are still unsure as to what metrics to use with most of them not adopting any metrics to assess effectiveness. Indicative of the importance of social media for B2B firms is also the study's finding that almost half the users intend to increase their budget for social media marketing in the following years.

With this special issue we hope to contribute to the advancement of knowledge on business-to-business branding and aspire to stimulate further interest in this significant but under-researched context of brand management. We hope that you will find this collection of studies interesting and thought provoking and in the right direction for moving the research agenda on business-to-business branding forward. The Guest Editors would like to thank the Editor in Chief for his trust and support and all the reviewers whose time and effort were paramount for the completion of this special issue.

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