



The role of the brand as a person in business to business brands

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ABSTRACT

Branding is an area that attracts much interest from different perspectives. However, most of the research concerning branding has leaned towards business to consumer (B2C) markets rather than business to business (B2B) markets. When B2B brands are the centre of a study, it is usually their tangible characteristics that are examined. Data is usually collected from either the manufacturers or the buyers, but not necessarily from both of these groups. This study explores the perceptions held by the people involved in both the manufacturing and in the use of the brand. It explicitly considers the relevance of one intangible characteristic of a brand, which is the paradigm of brand as a person, in the context of an industrial engineering B2B market. It examines the different perspectives from both sales and purchasing within the market and considers the wider characteristics that are recognised in that context, which are the country of origin and the brand personality. The results indicate that the brand as a person can be used when conceptualising B2B brands, because brand personality characteristics and brand nationality have been identified by the various players as characteristics of the brands.

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1. Introduction

Brands comprise emotional and functional values that are best suited to the various needs of potential buyers, including organisational buyers (Lynch & de Chernatony, 2007). Early research on B2B branding suggested that branding alone is of limited use (Saunders & Watt, 1979), but this view has significantly changed because it is now recognised that branding may play a powerful role. Even though branding is becoming more prevalent in the B2B domain, it is also recognised that the majority of the branding literature derives from the examination of B2C markets. Researchers have not investigated B2B branding to the same extent (i.e. Beverland, Napoli, & Lindgreen, 2007; Lynch & de Chernatony, 2007; van Riel, Pahud de Mortanges, & Streukens, 2005).

In some industrial markets it is increasingly difficult to maintain meaningful differentiation on the basis of product quality or price (Mudambi, Doyle, & Wong, 1997). A brand offers more than the quantifiable and tangible characteristics of the product or the service and many B2B companies who previously sold commodities have now developed branded offers (McQuiston, 2004). The brand as a person paradigm has been widely discussed in the B2C context after Aaker's (1997) seminal article. However, there is very little research on brand as a person element in the B2B context and, so far, it is only presented as a side construct in academic articles (Beverland et al., 2007; Persson, 2010). It is appreciated in the literature that despite this genuine interest in brand personality, there are still

important gaps in the research of the construct (Maehle & Supphellen, 2011). Given the fact that the brand as a person paradigm is widely used in the B2C branding literature, one of the arguably intriguing areas is to ascertain the presence and, if found, then to establish the relevance of brand as a person not least for developing B2B brands for targeting organisational buyers.

Most of the B2B research focusing on brand as a person element, obtains information from the customer's/buyer's perspective when examining both the country of origin (i.e. Ahmed, d'Astous, & Adraoui, 1994; Balabanis & Diamantopoulos, 2008; Bradley, 2001; Dzever & Quester, 1999) and when investigating whether brand personality is relevant in the B2B context (Kuhn, Alpert, & Pope, 2008; Persson, 2010). There is limited, if any, research on the views of other market players on these matters, especially from the manufacturers' point of view, which could be worthy of examination.

The objective of this paper is to contribute to the filling of these gaps. It aims to explore whether the brand as a person concept is applicable in B2B settings from the perspective of three different points in the supply chain, including the views of the sellers and two groups of buyers. It firstly reviews the relevant literature and presents the research focus, then it outlines the methodology and notes the results and finally provides some conclusions, while recognising limitations and suggesting directions for future research.

2. The brand as a person in the B2B context

Within general branding literature, brands have been conceptualised as possessing certain tangible and intangible components. The tangible components are those thought to be more rational and are described by concrete attributes that include the product, the

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physique of the offering and any other aspect of the offer that is material (Kapferer, 2007; Swai, Erdem, Louviere, & Dubelaar, 1993). The intangible components are abstract and include the services component, the brand as a person and the culture of the brand (de Chernatony & Segal-Horn, 2001; Kapferer, 2007).

In the existing B2B branding literature, it is also accepted that a brand encompasses both tangible and intangible characteristics. In recent research the B2B corporate brand image has been conceptualised using concepts widely discussed in the branding literature, including brand familiarity, product solution, service, distribution, relationship and company associations (Persson, 2010). Some of the previous research suggests that both tangible and intangible characteristics can be identified in four performance components of the brand value and in particular the product, the distribution services, the support services and the company components (Mudambi et al., 1997). Others suggest that in B2B markets – at the company brand level (rather than the product brand level) additional important aspects of the brand are the perception of: (1) company offering such as product, service and solutions/systems; (2) personal selling contacts such as the supplier company's customer facing sales staff behaviour and (3) network role such as, strategic network position and the supplier company's intentions towards partnership and cooperation with customers (Aspara & Tikkanen, 2008).

In principle it is recognised that there are intangible characteristics of B2B brands that could also be considered during the evaluation of the offering (Bendixen, Bukasa, & Abratt, 2004a, 2004b), although it should be acknowledged that, by their nature they are hard to measure, and that they are understood in a cognitive process (Mudambi et al., 1997). It is suggested that industrial buyers do not place equal importance on the many different attributes of the B2B brand (Mudambi, 2002). Some argue that the intangible attributes may be more important than tangible ones for a B2B brand (Lehmann & O'Shaughnessy, 1974; Shaw, Giglierano, & Kallis, 1989; van Birgelen, de Ruyter, & Wetzels, 2001), while others argue that the tangible aspects are of more importance (Chakrabarti, Feinman, & Fuentevilla, 1982). Some buyers saw some of the additional intangible attributes offered as a part of the augmented offer as order qualifiers (i.e. the minimum threshold), while others consider these as part of the total package of benefits (Alexander, Bick, Arbratt, & Bendixen, 2009).

The brand as a person is one of the intangible characteristics of the brand. Ascribing human features anthropomorphically in connection with brands is a trend that is increasingly recognised within branding literature. The brand as a person includes attributes such as brand personality (i.e. Aaker, 1997; Azoulay & Kapferer, 2003), brand gender (i.e. Azar & Darpy, 2009a, 2009b; Grohmann, 2009) and nationality of the brand, which considers studies published on the country of origin of the brand and others related to the brand nationality concept (i.e. Ahmed et al., 1994; Balabanis & Diamantopoulos, 2008). Research on B2B branding and its importance was published about the time that the concept was reported to be used by practitioners in consumer markets (Marketing News, 1982; Plummer, 1985), but this was before the concept of brand personality had been investigated in B2C markets by academics (Aaker, 1997). It is suggested that B2B companies have increasingly adopted corporate brand management initiatives in recent years and that they are interested in enhancing their branding capabilities (Aspara & Tikkanen, 2008). However, very little is known about the use of the brand as a person for B2B brands.

3. Brand personality in the B2B context

Brands have a personality and can develop distinctive personality traits, which differentiate them in consumers' minds, in the same way as human personalities can also differ (Aaker, 1997). The use of the term 'brand personality' originated as a non-product-based definition of the brand, and captured all that was not bound to the product's use,

performance, benefits, attributes, and so on (Azoulay & Kapferer, 2003) and has been defined as 'the set of human characteristics associated with a brand' (Aaker, 1997, p. 347) or 'the set of human personality traits that are both applicable to and relevant for brands' (Azoulay & Kapferer, 2003, p. 151). Brand personality gives to the brand human characteristics that have an individual nature and can distinguish one brand from any other within a single product category (Halliday, 1996), even when the product features have high similarity. Brands carry their past and the personality of a particular brand is connected to many other brand associations in consumer memory and accessed through spreading activation (Freling & Forbes, 2005).

Previously researchers attempted to find personality traits that could be associated with brands. Different pieces of research have suggested various human qualities as part of the personality of a brand (see Table 1). In addition to personality traits, some brands display other anthropomorphic characteristics within their brand personality. Researchers argue that brands have a gender dimension in their personality characteristics (Azoulay & Kapferer, 2003; Sung & Tinkham, 2005) as brands can be characterised as feminine or as masculine (Azar & Darpy, 2009a, 2009b; Grohmann, 2009), while others that the brand could be classified as belonging to a specific social class (Davies & Chun, 2002; Sung & Tinkham, 2005). Therefore, the gender and social class of the brands are presented in most studies which identify them as descriptors of brand personality.

Each of the studies summarised in Table 1, identifies a number of dimensions, sub dimensions or items that could be used to conceptualise brand personality. However, the personality dimensions (traits) are often different, and even when the same dimension is identified the sub dimensions and items are dissimilar. This inconsistency supports the argument that the scale should be used with extreme caution as researchers may encounter difficulties (Austin, Singuaw, & Mattila, 2003). Some suggest that managers might need to explore the effectiveness of branding strategies that incorporate 'multiple personalities', in an attempt to develop various identities, in order to reach different consumer segments (Freling & Forbes, 2005). Furthermore, the selection of qualitative and quantitative methodological approach used in the same study at the same time may identify changes to the apparent dominance of different traits in each one of the two data sets (Arora & Stoner, 2009). This may be related to the situation, which could be different because of the characteristics of the customers and what they find as important or the characteristics of the industry, since they might be perceived in a dissimilar manner depending on the context (Sung & Tinkham, 2005).

Developing a distinctive, strong and favourable personality can be beneficial for both products and services, since it provides emotional fulfilment and may lead to increased brand equity (Freling & Forbes, 2005; Veloutsou & Christodoulides, 2010). Different brand personality traits appear to influence brand attachment, purchase likelihood, and brand choice (Swaminathan, Stilley, & Ahluwalia, 2009).

The importance of expanding the brand personality research and investigating the concept across cultures was appreciated from the beginning of the academic investigation into the concept (Aaker, 1997). However, the role of brand personality has been somewhat overlooked in the B2B context where product features are of high importance. In the B2B research, brand personality was considered to be one of the many elements of Keller's brand equity model (Kuhn et al., 2008), or as one of the many sub-constructs which could be identified as descriptors of a component of brand image. These were labelled under company associations and could influence the willingness of a buyer to pay a price premium (Persson, 2010). Although the focus of those studies was not the concept of brand personality itself, it was noted within the findings that there were differing views about the relevance of brand as a person in a B2B context. In one of the studies, in the context of technology for electronic tracking of waste management in Australia, brand personality was characterised as an

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