A relational insight of brand personification in business-to-business markets

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Abstract

Customers find it difficult to differentiate between competing products based on their functional aspects. The shortening life cycle of products due to quick adoption of technological innovations by competitors makes it difficult for them to identify products based on specifications. The contemporary academic literature related to relationship management and brand management is passionate about customer and consumer psychology but little attention has been given to the usage of human attribute of the brand for managing resellers' brand selection criteria. This paper combines two marketing functions – branding and relationship management by using brand when personified, i.e., human as a representative of a brand. The paper presents use of the personified brand as human representatives of the brand for managing brand relationships and generating brand value in business-to-business markets. The proposal of the paper is to use personified brand as a tool for the execution of relationship marketing and branding strategies. The objective behind using representatives is to maximize the mindshare of resellers towards the brand and create value for them beyond products and services.

Keywords: Brand personification, brand representative, relationship management, brand management.

Introduction

The movement of mass marketing to relationship marketing as target marketing is focused on the individual needs of the customer before focusing on competitors (Day, 1994). An analytical and critical view of today's competitive business markets suggests that marketers need to demonstrate some differentiation between their own and competitive brands for the target audience (Roy *et al*., 2004; Tsai, 2005). In a competitive market the brand becomes the basis of differentiation between products (Delgado-Ballester, 2004; Keller and Lehmann, 2006). As customers' needs and preferences keep changing, customer service creates value that becomes a unique selling point for the brand (Duncan and Moriarty, 1998; Chun and Davies, 2006).

Marketing strategies relatively aligned to customers' needs with brand building and relationship management strategies prove to be influential in customer retention (Saren and Tzokas, 1998; Day, 2006). Efforts for maximizing relationship benefits by creating value for the customer as products and services with tailored messages drive customers towards loyalty (Dibb and Meadows, 2004; Ringberg *et al*., 2007). Sustaining business-to-business relationships by engaging customers in relational exchanges with differentiated offerings from competition has become a key point for marketeers (Ravald and Grönroos, 1996; Ringberg *et al*., 2007). For developing brand value in business-to-business markets, this paper proposes that brand relationships should be managed by brand personified, i.e., human representatives of the brand.

Fournier (1998) studied the behaviour of customers in consumer markets to understand the validity of the relationship that consumers develop with brands. The model developed by Fournier (1998) characterizes the types of relationships that consumers can have with brands and enables the strength of the relationship to be

evaluated. Sheth (1996) investigated customer behaviour in an organizational setting and used buyer-seller interactions to make an argument about the development of a relationship based on power, conflict and dependence between partners. The business-to-business literature assumes that interpersonal relationships are integral to branding in business markets, whereas business-to-consumer marketing literature takes a different approach as it considers brands to be the provider of relational value (Stewart and Pavlou, 2002; Pujari, 2004). The difference between business and consumer markets when viewed from the perspective of market size highlights the possibility of developing a direct one-to-one relationship between business customers and the brand (Gounaris and Avlonitis, 2001; Niraj *et al*., 2001). In order to develop interpersonal relationships with business customers the literature proposes the use of technology (Bitner *et al*., 2000; Pavlou, 2003). However, there is a lack of literature that addresses the ability of the human touch given to the relationship to improve the perceived strength of the relationship.

To fill this gap in the literature, this paper considers the ability of the brand personified as representative of the brand to provide a human touch to the relationship, develop and use these relationships to drive the resellers towards the brand in order to effectively manage the business-to-business marketing strategies of the brand. Brand personification in the literature has been explained from various perspectives (Aaker, 1997; Davies *et al*., 2001). Many authors have used a metaphoric dimension of brand personification to explain relationship management abilities (Chernatony and O'Riley, 1997; Saren and Tzokas, 1998) and value generation capabilities (Chun and Davies, 2006; Silva and Alwi, 2008) of brand when personified. In this paper, we go beyond these studies to elucidate the effects of

personification, particularly on business-to-business customers by combining a set of theories from two different streams of brand and relationship management.

As managers find it difficult to identify brand-reseller associations (Keller, 2003), this paper analyses the role of brand representative (Krake, 2005; Tsai, 2005) as brand personified in the human form (Aaker, 1997) for managing brand relationships (Saren and Tzokas, 1998). The next sections analyse the role of brand personified in business-to-business markets with a discussion on the input of human representatives in the context of relationship and brand management for influencing the selection criteria of resellers.

Branding - The Changing Landscape

The academic literature has demonstrated that customer management in business-to-business markets involves managing both the customer and the consumer through an emotional bonding with the brand (Saren and Tzokas, 1998; Webster, 2000). Globalization (Levitt, 1983; Baker, 1985; Jain, 1989; Sheth and Sisodia, 1999; Zineldin, 2000), technological innovations (Lung, 2001) and growing competition (Knox, 2004) have forced marketeers to be innovative in their marketing approaches for sustaining their position in today's fiercely competitive business world (Luo *et al.*, 2005). It has been assessed and measured in competitive business-to-business market conditions that successfully managed reseller relationships are beneficial for both the company and the reseller (Dwyer *et al.*, 1987).

The empirical marketing literature demonstrates the importance of customers and a need for market orientation of the brand (Jaworski and Kohli, 1993; Shocker *et al.*, 1994; Duncan and Moriarty, 1998; Webster, 2000; Grewal *et al.*, 2001). Much has been written on business-to-business brand relationships with a focus on

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individual constructs (Brodie *et al*., 2002; Ballantyne and Aitken, 2007; Gupta *et al*., 2008). Previous research on branding and relationship marketing has explicitly explained the personification of the brand as a human and its impact on customers as an influencing factor (Lacobucci and Ostrom, 1996; Davies *et al*., 2001, 2004; Krake, 2005; Ringberg *et al*., 2007).

Role of Brand Personification

Relationship marketing is critical in business-to-business markets for brands as it influences the effectiveness of branding when combined with the attributes of adding value (Webster, 2000). For a smooth relationship, creating a single-point interface between managers, service centres and business customers is very important (Wagner, 2003). This need for an interface in brand relationships occurs in order to securely exchange, manage and distribute information to successfully implement strategies and monitor deliveries (Srinivasan *et al*., 2002).

The human attribute of the brand in the form of a personified brand (Aaker, 1997) becomes a real interface between the company and the resellers. Its metaphoric properties enable resellers to have a direct interaction with the brand (Davies *et al*., 2001). The human representatives of the brand allow a direct interaction between company and resellers, that strengthens the relationship by influencing the effects of brand communication and information flow. The personified brand as a conduit metaphor ensures participation of resellers in loyalty programmes by organizing brand platforms suitable for resellers to interact with consumers (Reddy, 1979; Axley, 1984). Such a platform enables resellers to take advantage of the opportunities

available in the marketplace and encourages them to share marketing and sales information with the brand.

Brand personified as human representatives acts as a real interface between the brand and the reseller that helps in developing an emotional bonding between the resellers and the brand (Saren and Tzokas, 1998). In addition, the feeling of being heard strengthens brand relationships from the resellers' point of view (Chernatony and O'Riley, 1997). At the same time, the use of technology allows resellers to provide information that automates brand promotion initiatives (Gupta *et al*., 2008).

Technology can be used effectively as a tool in the development of a virtual interface (Gammelgaard and Ritter, 2005) that supports the activities and actions of the real interface. Brand when personified as a human representative can act as a real interface between the brand and its resellers. This paper suggests that resellers who have access to both interfaces, i.e., real (brand personified) and virtual (technological face of a brand), can benefit in many ways, depending on their business segment. The company-controlled information exchange system enables connections between managers and resellers because it allows an exchange of information related to their individual area of business. The efficient flow of information through both real and virtual interfaces is very useful in managing a company's relationship with its resellers. An instant and robust system for the flow of market and reseller information equips managers to innovate and reinvent their marketing strategies by taking quick decisions, formulating standard or tailored programmes and implementing them sooner than competitors.

The role of communications in the brand relationship management system is to create brand value for potential business customers (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). The

brand perception of resellers forms a basis for the success of a reseller relationship programme (Randall *et al.*, 1998). The representatives of the brand try to develop a progressive relationship between brand and resellers (Chernatony and O'Riley, 1997). As a real interface they communicate with resellers to bring clarity in their understanding of brand messages and to enable them to make positive evaluations from the communications received by them from the brand. Such initiatives made by brand representatives help to build positive brand perceptions in the minds of resellers. By acting as a promoting consultant for the reseller's business, brand personified uses the reseller's customer base to generate brand value. The human form of brands as brand personified continuously works towards developing relationships with resellers by understanding their needs and fulfilling them by using brand resources to enhance their business performance.

Brand personified as human representatives act as pre-sales consultants to resellers. They become useful when resellers need to authenticate their association with the brand and to impart product and brand knowledge to the consumer. By contributing value to relationships, brand personified tries to develop an element of trust between the company and the reseller. Brand personified as a representative is the face of the company in the marketplace (Aaker, 1997). This face of the brand as a real interface between brand and resellers also helps in solving marketing issues related to the brand. Brand personified as human representatives can gauge reseller efforts towards promoting the brand. They can notify those who use brand support to reach the consumer without participating in brand sales by monitoring ongoing exchanges between the brand and the resellers. Brand personified as human representatives work very closely with resellers in such a way that they develop capabilities for analysing the potential of the individual resellers.

The relationship management process is based on the relational exchange theory which is grounded on commitments and opportunism (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Companies control such relationships through incentives and support programmes which in turn contribute to increased sales (Dowling and Uncles, 1997). Flexibility in marketing policies helps the brand personified as human representatives in managing returns from reseller support plans by successful implementation and execution of the marketing programmes (Borders, 2006).

Context of relationships

Relationship marketing was founded and applied in competitive markets where customers have choices to make from a variety of products or services (Berry, 1995; Melewar *et al.*, 2001). Relationship marketing management is similar to target marketing, aimed at exceeding customer expectation and ensuring deliveries in terms of both profits and growth to the company and value to the customer (Day, 1994). A brand relationship management programme is cognitive in nature with two perspectives, namely core and operational. In business-to-business markets, trust and commitment bridge the gap between attitude and intention of the customer instead of satisfaction (Garbarino and Johnson, 1999). For managing reseller markets, there is a need for companies owning the brands to establish a system that not only involves both company and the reseller but that also monitors deliveries for mutual success (Walters and Lancaster, 1999).

Relationship marketing in a business-to-business market attracts potential resellers to the marketing policies of the brand by generating value and delivering best

solutions (Dwyer *et al*., 1987). A successful reseller relationship management programme should be proactive in its approach, have wide geographical reach and should be very quick to provide pre- and post-sales support (Keller and Lehmann, 2006). It should also coordinate the procedures related to both customer and consumer (Webster, 2000). Such relationship management programmes can bring success when backed up with a robust plan for implementation and control.

Expanding to newer territories implies geographical expansion and increased focus of the company (Yang *et al*., 1992). With globalization, saturating markets and growing competition, companies tend to look for avenues in markets where their presence is relatively low trying to increase customer awareness in untapped territories. Companies' broadening strategies not only lead to enhanced presence but also provide a developed local sales infrastructure and support that is useful for encouraging other potential resellers who are influential to their set of consumers (Keller and Lehmann, 2006). As local resellers have a better understanding of their territories, associating with them helps in tapping local business opportunities (Dwyer *et al*., 1987). Such relationship strategies keep resellers attached to the company as they tend to see their own business grow while working with the brand, and seek to develop a relationship with the brand.

It is not possible for a brand to share similar relationships with all resellers. It will be difficult for a brand relationship management programme to be successful in the absence of a planning and implementation process (Srivastava *et al*., 1999). In specific target markets, the representatives of the brand analyse and identify the potential resellers with whom to work. Representatives of the brand coordinate between the brand and the resellers to customize brand promotions and brand support

programmes. The customized programmes provide the reseller with positive brand experience that allows them to have a positive perception of the brand in their minds.

Adding value to a reseller's business by developing and managing relationships not only develops emotional bonding between the brand and the reseller but also brings tangible benefits to both the company and the reseller (Webster, 2000). Planned interactions for communicating additional benefits from the brand to the reseller become useful by passing information about product and service (Dowling and Uncles, 1997). The success route for managing the brand relationship management programme goes through various business processes of the company internally and externally. The brands need to communicate their business policies efficiently and effectively to their resellers in order to fulfil the objective of building up the reputation of a reliable brand (Romano and Fjermestad, 2003). Effective brand communication is an important part of relationship marketing as it creates fast brand recall. In a sustainable relationship management programme, resellers acknowledge the contribution of the brand in the developmental needs of their business (Webster, 2000).

Brand relationship management cannot function properly if strategy versus implementation models do not slot properly into each other. For example, lack of a systematic and proactive approach without commitment will not allow fast, smooth information flows between the nodal points, resulting in failure of the programme (Sawhney and Zabin, 2002). Information develops an effective organizational learning capability that becomes useful in creating competitive advantage that is difficult to imitate (Zahay and Griffin, 2004). Brand personified as human

representatives becomes a real interface to capture reseller, competition and market information from the resellers.

The suggested brand relationship management strategy based on coordination efforts from brand personified helps in identifying and working with potential resellers by contributing to their business performance for generating brand value. The information received by the company through real (brand personified) and virtual (technological face of the brand) interfaces, if analysed to understand the performance of current and potential business associations, can be used to position the brand above competitors within the segment where it operates (Zahay and Griffin, 2004). A brand relationship management programme can generate brand value based on real-time market information. Real-time information enables performing resellers to stay in relationship with the brand because it reflects on the value the brand contributes to their business, acting as a roadmap of the growth path of the association between resellers and brand (Dwyer *et al.*, 1987).

Context of branding

The emphasis on relationships as a vehicle to increased sales and their linkage to performance drives organizations to invest in marketing for increased revenues (Jaworski and Kohli, 1993). Such investments, when delivering superior value to resellers, strengthen the position of the brand giving it an edge over competitors with favourable brand perceptions and brand experiences (Webster, 2000). Marketeers try to develop stronger associations by using their intangible assets such as brand value (Rust *et al.*, 2004). They use various marketing tools like advertising, promotions, pre- and post-service support and sales incentives to achieve their objective of gaining

the maximum mindshare of business-to-business customers (Amit and Zott, 2001). Such efforts influence the purchase behaviour of resellers in competitive reseller markets (Rust *et al*., 2004).

Fornell and Wernerfet (1987) explained marketing as the efforts put in by companies to retain customers, while Gruen *et al*. (2000) suggested that companies should manage their customers as assets with the objective of retaining them on the basis of a relationship of exchange. Other researchers identified this concept as customer loyalty, an organizational goal aimed at keeping customers attracted to the brand by simultaneously moving them away from competitors (Srivastava *et al*., 1999). These definitions have been discussed as an activity of repeat purchase intention by Dick and Basu (2000) and as a consequence of perceived value of the brand in the customer's mind by Dowling and Uncles (1997).

Desired customer share forces companies to look for more avenues of growth. To capitalize on the untapped growth potential, companies invest in brand, products and processes where partnerships and people play a key role (Ravald and Grönroos, 1996). The developmental approach of retaining customers in business-to-business markets is based on measures of brand value, flexible policies and efficient business processes (Chernatony and O'Riley, 1997). Companies also examine returns on their marketing investments and analyse the growth-drivers in order to become consumer-centric rather than channel-centric (Webster, 2000). Brand promotions are used to encourage growth by building up brand awareness and educating customers about the brand and its products (Low and Fullerton, 1994). In the business-to-consumer segment, customer loyalty is influenced by brand visibility at the point of purchase, perceived brand value, strong distribution and customer education (Webster, 2000),

whereas the loyalty of business-to-business customers is driven by demand-patterns, adapted sales strategies, product availability, and reduced inventory costs (Keller and Lehmann, 2006).

Hence, innovative marketing, aggressive branding and a strong reseller network can bring success to the brand management programme (Webster, 2000). Success can be achieved by using relationship marketing strategies because these strategies compete on brand value propositions instead of price propositions and it does not allow product discounting to benefit from customer loyalties (Dowling and Uncles, 1997). It is worth noting that loyalty is beyond the level of feeling satisfied with the brand (Delgado-Ballester and Munuera-Alemán, 2001). Saren and Tzokas (1998) note that closer and more regular interactions with business customers and the skills of controlling their purchases, sales and inventory with a commitment to empower them with selling skills and rewarding performances lead to customer loyalty and retention.

In such an environment, long-term relationships become the keystone of marketing (Keller and Lehmann, 2006). We posit that the key to the success of a brand relationship programme is good management and effective monitoring. Based on a plan to position brand as a leader before its competitors, this study proposes the importance of identifying target markets and working very closely with selected resellers. To work very closely with selected resellers, brands should involve a human as the face of the brand in order to develop a satisfactory and strong one-to-one personal relationship with resellers. Such one-to-one relationships are influential in developing trust to encourage resellers in making a commitment to the brand.

Overall, the management of brand relationships is a marketing philosophy. When driven by brand personification, that is, by brand as a person, the brand relationship management programme develops an orientation for sales. It can also be understood as a partnership policy that works towards the success of relationships of partners in business, i.e., the brand and the customer. This paper argues that a representative of the brand in a relationship management programme plays the role of an authoritarian coordinator between the company and the reseller with a commitment from the brand to make a difference in the reseller's business performance. Such a management of brand relationships is based on the concepts of communication and involves sharing quality information between the resellers and the company in order to work interdependently and also resolve conflicts mutually.

Implications

Brand relationships when operationally managed by brand personified can be very influential in achieving the objectives of the brand relationship management programme. Brand personified can stimulate the innovativeness in marketing initiatives of resellers and encourage them to be associated with the brand for a longer period (Keller and Lehmann, 2006). Previous research has focused on brand relationships and the factors influencing their management with an emphasis on contributing to resellers' business by providing them with brand value and opportunities for relational exchanges. The studies on brand personification have laid the bases for its contribution to brand relationships with its customers (Chun and Davies, 2006). This paper extends the knowledge available to scholars from the business-to-consumer domain and proposes the use of brand representatives to

manage business-to-business relationships of the brand. This article will draw the attention of future researchers to the usefulness of the human attribute of the brand and help managers in identifying key elements of business-to-business relationships. It will have implications in domestic market expansion plans as well as the integration of marketing into sales of international brands.

Conclusion

Customer retention in business-to-business markets highlights two important elements: branding and relationship marketing together in the form of brand relationship management. Analysis of the brand relationship management process shows that it builds up satisfied customers, driving them towards loyalty by developing one-to-one relationships, and resulting in actual market exchanges. The key to the programme is field management with a human representing the brand and differentiating it from traditional marketing because it works towards integrated marketing initiatives. A distinction is made by brand personified as human representatives in identifying the opportunities that exist in the market for the benefit of both the brand and its resellers. The relevance of a proposed brand relationship management strategy explains brand relationship marketing that opens up a very wide area for future research into innovative marketing with brand personification.

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