

Chapter 18

Sustainable Brand Personality Traits for Business-to- Business Markets

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ABSTRACT

The impact of globalization and technological advancements on businesses is increasing, making innovation and differentiation essential for survival in competitive markets. Branding is a useful tool for business differentiation, which can be achieved by a strong brand personality. Sustainability, as a strategy integrated with branding, offers the opportunity to gain competitive advantage. Associating sustainability practices with brand personality and integrating them into the brand is important, especially for business-to-business (B2B) brands. However, research on B2B branding is still scarce. Drawing on the tenets of social identity theory, this chapter explains brand personality traits from a sustainability perspective for B2B brands. Based on a series of qualitative and quantitative studies, brand personality traits are identified for B2B markets concerning the environmental, social, and economic pillars of sustainability. This analysis will support B2B managers aiming to promote an image of sustainability for their brands in an increasingly competitive industrial market.

INTRODUCTION

Today, with the influence of globalization and the increased product and service variety, there is a reduction in product and service differences in the market. In this market environment, there are a number of strategic initiatives that companies can apply to differentiate themselves from the competitors, attract customers' attention, and influence their purchasing behavior. In that respect, brand is the most important tool that can be used to ensure that a business' products or services can be distinguished from their competitors (Backhaus, Steiner, & Lügger, 2011). Therefore, businesses, who offer similar products

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-5757-9.ch018

and service varieties to competitors, and desire differentiation in the minds of customers, increasingly contemplate on branding (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001).

Creating a strong brand in every aspect is important, not only for B2C brands but also for B2B brands (Aaker, 1991, 1996; Kapferer, 2004; Keller, 2003; Schmitt & Geus, 2006). Previous research on B2B branding has primarily focused on determining the differences in brand awareness between consumer and industrial contexts (Brown, Bellenger, & Johnston, 2007), the application of successful branding strategies in consumer markets in an industrial context (Kuhn, Alpert, & Pope, 2008) and the development of new measures of brand value for the industrial context (Kapferer, 2004). However, to help B2B marketers to position brands in the competitive marketplace, emotional brand benefits have become increasingly important (Bergstrom, Blumenthal, & Crothers, 2002; Gundlach, Achrol, & Mentzer, 1995; Lynch & de Chernatony, 2007). In this regard, the concept of brand personality provides differentiation by building a strong relationship between seller and the customer (Herbst & Merz, 2011; Johar, Sengupta, & Aaker 2005; Ward, Light, & Goldstine 1999). Therefore, brand personality, which is defined as the set of human characteristics associated with a brand (Aaker, 1997), is also considered to be contributing to the differentiation of B2B brands (Herbst & Merz, 2011). Nevertheless, most research on brand personality focuses specifically on consumer markets (Grohmann, 2009; Herbst & Merz, 2011), rather than the industrial context (Herbst & Merz, 2011). Also, the differentiation of customer purchasing behaviors and characteristics in developed and emerging economies emphasizes that branding strategies should suit the local context (Atsmon, Kuentz, & Seong, 2012). However, most of the research on brand personality has been conducted particularly in developed economies, with regard to consumer preferences and effects on purchasing behavior (Herbst & Merz, 2011).

Another important attribute for a brand is to reflect a sustainability approach (Berns et al., 2009; Bilgin, 2009; Mariadoss, Tansuhaj, & Mouri, 2011; Wagner, 2005). Although in the past, the expectation from a brand was only that it functions as promised; today, however, customers also expect different aspects such as social positioning, and sensitiveness to environmental issues. Brands, which are specialized in the field of sustainability, and have succeeded in transforming it into competitive advantage, are regarded as future leaders (Kumar & Christodouloupoulou, 2014). From this perspective, it is advantageous for brands to adopt sustainability as a brand personality characteristic by integrating the concepts of creating a strong brand personality and sustainability. In addition, there seems to be a lack of comprehensive study on sustainable brand personality traits in the literature.

Within this framework, the primary objective of this study is to identify and categorize the sustainable brand personality traits for B2B markets. This will help industrial marketers reflect their sustainability efforts into their brands by building brand personalities that embraces sustainability. The theoretical framework of this study utilizes social identity theory, which has been applied mainly to consumer brands to explain brand loyalty. This study examines brand personality in terms of B2B brands in the framework of social identity theory. For B2B brands, customer's identification with a certain brand led them separate the brand from others, and provide a competitive advantage. The social identity theory is important for explaining this relationship between B2B brand and its customer (Kim, Han, & Park, 2001).

In that respect, two research questions are identified; (1) What are the sustainable brand personality traits for B2B markets?; (2) How these industrial brand personality traits apply to the three different pillars of sustainability; namely, social, environmental and economic?

The first section presents the review of the relevant literature for the important concepts of the study. Next section explains the research methodology and the findings on the basis of a series of qualitative

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