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10

Building Brands in SMEs

Brands are nowadays paramount to the success of an organisation. We live in a branded world. If you look around, everything you use in your life, be it clothes or electrical appliances, books or pens, means of transport or a take-away meal, you cannot avoid encountering brands.

Brands play a crucial role in helping organisations that use them to gain consumers' attention. Brands are not only a distinctive logo or sign to differentiate the product from a competitor. They are a powerful means of communication that organisations can use to build a relationship with their consumers. Brands can be used to communicate the quality of the product to consumers in a first instance, but they can also help the company to communicate what the company stands for. They can communicate the philosophy, mission and vision of the organisation that uses them.

Brands have always been important to differentiate a product sold in competitive markets, but, nowadays, branding is an essential tool to support organisational identity and reputation^[8]. By aligning brands, organisational identity and reputation has proven to be a very powerful marketing tool for larger organisations; however, in time, SMEs also started approaching the concept of branding^[2].

This chapter provides information about the function of brands and branding activity in SMEs. In this chapter, you can also find a description of those factors that are important for brands' success, and learn how brands link with the mission and vision of an organisation.

10.1 Brands functionality and the branding activity

- All the definitions of brand tend to highlight two functions: first, a competitive function – i.e., brands exist to differentiate a product,

service or company from the competitors^[13] – and second, the relational function – i.e., brands communicate to the consumer what the organisation stands for^[11, 13].

One way to discuss the different definitions of brand is according to their focus. There are three groups: functional definitions (focusing on the physical features of the product) developed between the 1960s until the late 1980s; customer-oriented definitions (whose focus is on the customer as the centre of the branding activity) developed in the 1990s; and relational definitions (focusing on the brand as a relationship between the consumers and the company) developed in the last decade or so and strictly connected to the concept of value proposition.¹

10.1.1 Differentiating function

The seminal definition of brand focuses mainly on the functional and physical elements of differentiation (e.g., logo type, name, font, colour, shape, etc.). 'A brand is a name, term, design, symbol or any other feature that identifies one seller's goods or service as distinct from those of other sellers'. Several authors share the same definition^[8, 14, 28, 33], focusing on the physical attributes or features of the design aimed to obtain a competitive advantage because these physical features are more straightforward to people's perceptions and understanding.

Considering the physically related definition of brand, which is associated with the physical features (e.g., name, sign, symbol), there is a strong tendency among practitioners to combine marketing and design. Design allows the company to express its personality through the product or service. When customers engage with the company through the tangible, physical, aesthetical characteristics of the product, the brand receives a personality and creates a meaning in the customers' minds, in which the product or service is just one expression of this same meaning.

For example, the iPad represents high technology and entertainment in a young, active, cool and fashionable device. Similarly, the dancing Chinese character 'jing',² presented in a white and red calligraphic stone carving, represented activity, vibrant and energetic movement, noble sentiments in sport, tradition, and modernity for the Olympics in Beijing in 2008.

10.1.2 Communication function

An overly strong focus on the physical aspects of the brand might create confusion about what a brand really is, if it is only about the logo type, colour and functional features. This gave rise to criticism in the 1990s that called for a refocus on customers or consumers – the ultimate targets

of the brands – whose views, attitudes and perceptions are critical to the development of brand awareness and brand loyalty.

Wood^[41] comments on the seminal definition of brand, stating that the key aspects of the definition are the words 'any other feature', as this allows for intangibles, such as image, to be the point of differentiation. The particular value of this definition is that it focuses on a fundamental brand purpose, which is differentiation^[41]. These intangibles allow the definition of brand to shift over time from a functional definition toward a customer-oriented definition.

Ambler^[4] considers the brand to be 'the promise of the bundles of attributes that someone buys and provides satisfaction'. The attributes Ambler^[4] refers to can be tangible or invisible, rational or emotional, and real or illusory. Thus, the focus of this definition shifts from the physical aspects of the brand proposition to the perceptions of customers and/or consumers. It focuses on the implicit fact that it is customers who buy the brand, and they should be satisfied through the promises made by the company, which are stated by the brand.

In a later work, Ambler and Styles^[5] revised the brand development process and, consequently, they now define brands according to two different approaches: 'product plus' and 'holistic'. The product plus approach does not differ from the previous definitions, as it sees the brand as a distinctive element of the product line, identifying the product or company. However, by the holistic point of view, 'the brand is considered to be the sum of all elements of the marketing mix: product is just one element, alongside price, promotion and distribution'^[5], seeing the brand in all its extensions. The major contribution of this perspective is the inclusion of the marketing mix, so that brand is no longer just the name or logo type, but also encompasses the distribution channel, the price dimension and the way the message is communicated.

The functional and the physical elements of the brand provide a vehicle for physical differentiation (e.g., appearance of the product, packaging, labelling, etc.), whereas the customer- and consumer-centric definition of Ambler and Styles^[5] emphasises the deeper (emotional) relational function of branding.

10.1.3 Relational function

The definition of brand has shifted over time – from the customer-related definition towards the relational definition – as brands create relationships with the consumers or customers. Brands should differentiate while communicating to the customers and consumers with whom they are seeking to build a relationship^[11, 12, 27].

Brown^[9] proposes that a brand is all the mental connections that people have around it, so every time a customer or consumer thinks of or encounters a brand, some mental connections are generated, creating a relationship with the brand through recognition.

De Chernatony and McDonald^[13] see brands as a 'relationship' with the customer:

This relationship is personified either by the organization's name, or by the brand name on the product itself. ... When we refer to the term "brand" ... we use it to encompass not only consumer products, but a whole host of offerings, which include people (such as politicians and pop stars), places (such as Bangkok), ships (such as the QEII), companies, industrial products, service products, and so on.^[13]

Therefore, a brand is more than just the sum of its component parts. 'It embodies, for the purchaser or user, additional attributes which, whilst they might be considered by some to be "intangible", are still very real'^[13]. In this last statement, de Chernatony and McDonald^[13] build a more complete definition:

A successful brand is an identifiable product, service, person or place, augmented in such a way that the buyer or user perceives relevant, unique added values which match their needs most closely. Furthermore, its success results from being able to sustain these added values in the face of competition.^[13]

An extended definition of brand – categorised as relational – is provided by Aacker^[1], who states that a brand is more than a product. The latter is characterised by its scope, attributes, quality/value and uses³, whereas a brand has additional elements⁴. For example, brand users (the Charlie woman), country of origin (Audi has German craftsmanship), organisational associations (3M is an innovative company), brand personality (Bath and Body Works is a retail brand with energy and vitality), symbols (the stagecoach represents Wells Fargo Bank), brand-customer relationship (Gateway is a friend), emotional benefits (Saturn owners feel pride about driving an American car) and self-expressive benefits (a Hobart customer uses only the best), can all be categorised as relational because of the different relational elements entering the definition, i.e., all those elements that contribute to create a relationship, or bond, with the customer or consumer.

10.1.4 The 'value' element of branding

In addition to the introduction of the concept of relationship in the definition, the major contribution of these authors to the definition consists in the insertion of the value element when stating that the buyer or user perceives relevant, unique added values matching their needs. This definition encompasses both the functional and the customer-oriented definitions, adding the value perception dimension, which is most relevant to the completion of the transaction – the purchase. The reference to uniqueness brings us back to the concept of competition, because a company that has a unique (added) value proposition which matches most closely what its customers wants is more likely to succeed. Once more, it is underlined that the core function of a brand is to differentiate. However, the issue of value receives particular attention in the relational definitions.

Value is perceived when the advantage or benefit gained by the customer or consumer is higher than the costs (monetary costs, opportunity costs and risk) involved in acquiring this advantage. According to Monroe^[32], it is the ratio of the perceived benefits and perceived sacrifice. Value is the basic foundation of everything that is done in marketing^[21], and it is recognised that customers' satisfaction depends on value^[22, 29].

The competitiveness of a brand, though, can be based on only two strategies^[13]: the first is cost driven – which is based on the ability to sell at a lower price due to lower costs – and the second is value added – which is based on the creation of value. This is the element that proves the effectiveness of the brand, because customers' purchases take place when they perceive genuine value: because of low price (value for money) or enhanced benefits (emotional value).

According to the relational definitions, brands have to create a relationship with consumers or customers by delivering value. It is important for companies to pursue a relationship marketing strategy because it creates more value for its customers than companies that focus on the product only through stronger ties – related to technology, information and knowledge^[19]. Value is delivered through value propositions, i.e., a valuable offer (everything that is offered to the customer against his/her price). The value proposition describes the unique product and service mix, customer relations, and corporate image that are offered by the company^[25].

By following a cost-driven strategy, the value proposition finds its essence or value in the lower price, due to its ability to lower cost production, whereas a value-added value proposition finds its essence in the perceived higher benefits deriving from the purchase. The introduction

of product or service features that are not driven by the actual customers' needs can be nothing more than a short-term solution.^[20]

10.2 Mission statements and consumers' experience

Mission statements are specific messages or mottos a firm uses to channel the ethos of the company. There are different types of mission statements, depending on the purpose for which they have been created by the firm^[20]. Some mission statements express in one sentence (or a few) the overall vision of the firm (what it desires to be in the very long term) or the strategy the firm is pursuing; that is, what the company aims to achieve with their activities. Mission statements are very helpful to determine a very clear direction to the employees of the firm and are the flagship of the company, so they indicate the type of culture shared within the organisation.

However, in some cases, mission statements can also be constraining if they are not created properly. They are often public, and both customers and consumers can access them. In some cases, mission statements become part of the brand or are strongly associated with it, so they can contribute to the overall customer experience. Firms with clear mission statements are more likely to monitor the success of their mission statements and are more likely to survey their customers, therefore finding ways to improve customers' experiences^[17] with their products or brands. So, overall, clear mission statements can speak to a firm's stakeholders (including employees and customers) about what the firm stands for. The mission statement reinforces the brand, and the brand reinforces the mission statement.

10.3 The importance of branding and branding success factors

Marketing information contributes to brand equity, and, according to Keller^[20], the main motivations to pay attention to a company's brand equity can be found in the financial need to estimate the value of a brand (in terms of asset valuation, i.e., for merger, acquisitions or divestiture) and in the need to improve marketing productivity. Therefore, branding is an important tool firms can capitalise on. However, there are some specific factors that affect the success of brands.

10.3.1 Why branding is important

Branding is a vital activity for companies, and several reasons have been given in the literature to support the importance of branding for

businesses. First, they differentiate one company's products or offer to the customer from another^[3, 8, 13-14, 28, 33].

A second reason sees brands expressing the uniqueness of a company's value proposition, creating a relationship with the customer or consumer^[1, 12-13, 25, 27]. Brands help companies to position their products or services, and therefore, they become a strategic asset through the creation of brand awareness and recognition, better relationships and higher loyalty, which can potentially generate overall future income (brand equity). Brands can create a mental connection with the customer^[9], in fact:

'A brand is a strategic asset that is key to long-term performance and should be so managed' [2]. There is evidence that brands contribute to the creation of relationships with the customer or consumer. De Chernatony and McDonald support the relationship function of brands [13]: 'Brands can develop different relationships with customers... and a successful brand aims to develop a high-quality relationship, in which customers feel a sense of commitment and belonging', they maintain, adding that 'relationship marketing aims to develop long-term loyal customers'.

However, the importance of branding is dependent on the role of the brand as perceived by the brand owner. For example, some practitioners (especially in SMEs) might perceive the brand as nothing more than a name on a package, whereas others might perceive the brand as a promise to deliver what the customer wants, and still others may view the brand as a vehicle for communicating the core values of the business.

To companies dealing with commodities, the functional element of the brand might be more prominent than the emotional aspects, whereas in other sectors, the emotional element might be more relevant. Therefore, the orientation to branding might affect the company in the perception of the importance of the brand.

A third reason for branding's importance can be found in the ability of brands to create recognition^[31, 39], and consequently, the success of a brand can be defined as the degree of brand recognition. Brand recognition occurs when customers or consumers know the brand and its qualities^[59] and consumers tend to recall those with high recognition more easily^[31].

As a fourth reason, brands can generate and increase trust and decrease the perception of risk related to potential cognitive dissonances. Brands can do this because, generally speaking, people fear the unknown, and there is a higher tendency to be loyal to or to trust brands that are well known, long established and already 'run-in'^[6, 15]. Familiarity generates

higher trust, and more information about the brand means the customer is better positioned to make the right decision and reduce risk^[24]. The more people know about a brand, the easier it is to trust it, simply because the risk is lower; branding reduces uncertainty^[7, 11, 23, 36].

Brands with high recognition are undeniably valuable because they guarantee future income streams. Companies know that loyal customers will repeatedly buy their brands and are also more willing to support them during a crisis^[13].

A fifth reason branding is important is found in brands' ability to deliver satisfaction through a promise of performance^[4] and to encompass all the elements of the marketing mix^[5].

A sixth reason for the importance of branding is the creation of value^[1, 30]. Brands can compete when they are able to deliver a value to the consumer, i.e., when the benefit they deliver is greater than the cost (financial and non-financial) and the risk involved in the transaction.

In light of the literature, it can be concluded that brands are important tools to compete on the market because of the potential differentiation they can express. This differentiation can be expressed through brands that are able to create relationships with the customers or consumers. However, the relationships are built on the messages the brand manages to communicate through its identity, i.e., it depends on how it manages to position itself in people's perceptions. The identity of a brand should be clear, so it is reflected in the value proposition and conveys the functional and emotional meanings to the customers or consumers. However, the ability to convey the meanings depends on the level of understanding of the brand by the practitioner. It differs from one company to another because the business world is heterogeneous with companies of all sizes and resources operating in different markets.

10.3.2 Success factors in branding

The literature points out eight main factors of success in brand building. First, it appears that a clear statement of intent about what the brand stands for is an essential ingredient in branding^[1, 13], contributing to a crystal-clear brand identity by capitalising on a strong value proposition.

Second, culture is another success factor, alongside customer focus. The most relevant success factor is the acquisition, analysis and use of marketing information, on the grounds that no effective and efficient decision-making can take place without a sound knowledge of the market, thereby disabling the competitiveness of the company

operating in blindness on the market. From the literature, it emerges that the lack of marketing information is a barrier to the brand development process.

The cultural element and the quality of the leadership are important aspects of the potential success of branding because what brands communicate is captured by people's perceptions and translated into a positioning in customers' minds. Customers then match their perceptions of value to the value proposition positioned in their minds^[35].

Aacker^[1] agrees that 'brands are the basis for sustainable advantage for most organisations. However, strong brands do not just happen. Rather, they result from the creation of winning brand strategies and brilliant executions from committed, disciplined organizations'^[1].

A third factor of success is the fact that committed organisations are probably more likely to build strategies on the basis of the information collected from the market. Therefore, marketing intelligence plays a fundamental role because, through the collection of data, there is a higher probability that a business will gain a deeper understanding of the information necessary to develop a brand^[48].

And fourth, positioning and image creation are other factors of success in brand development, along with the creation of an image^[1, 3, 34, 40].

Ries and Trout^[34] make the point that creating positioning in customers' minds is of utmost importance as, in today's marketplace, the strategies that worked in the past do not work anymore, because there is an overload of offers in terms of products and brands, and the only way to create a successful brand⁵ is, according to the authors, to keep it simple and deliver straightforward messages. They suggest touching base with reality, and the only reality worth considering is the one lived by the consumers or customers.

They maintain that creating something new is almost impossible nowadays, so a better tactic is to reposition what already exists.

Differentiation is the core of branding; however, it is often difficult to find the right way to generate something different. This is especially true in sophisticated and fast-moving markets. Different levels of sophistication correspond to some behavioural tendencies, so where there is low sophistication, brands stress product features. However, when there is high sophistication, and with the increase in the competition, product features are a given, and the stress shifts to the emotional and rational components of value perception.

A fifth factor is brand identity, along with coherence of thought and action^[1, 13, 37]. It is important because it attracts customers' interest and possibly builds loyalty. The basic step is to have a clear specification

of brand identity and position – where the brand stands – in order to provide value^{11, 12-13]}.

Strong coherence of thought and action should be shown in order to contribute to a clear identity that will be expressed in brand recognition through the image positioned. Among the examples that can be found to support this assertion is the case of Innocent Drinks' smoothies. They attribute most of their success to the image created through an integration of good graphic design, product characteristics and corporate culture.

Coherence of thought and action can result in the creation of added value and stronger brand identity for the firm. Furthermore, it contributes to an appropriate structure in the organisational assets of the corporate management and professional groups, as Schroeder and Salzer-Möling^[37] suggested; de Chernatony and McDonald^[13] supported the notion: 'Everyone should be aware of what the brand stands for and they all need to be committed to contributing to its success'.

Coherence of thought and action leading to consistency over time can be achieved with a continuous effort to position the brand. Positioning can be effective through the action of leadership, which is able to serve the need of coherence between what the brand communicates and the company values. It is business culture that determines the clarity of the value proposition. In other words, when the leadership is able to define clearly what the brand represents, it is more likely that other people within the business will be able to do so. More importantly, vision, corporate culture, and brand identity and image on their own are not very useful, it is the relationship among them that determines success, as Vallaster and de Chernatony^[40] proposed.

Aacker considers brand identity to be one of the four main dimensions of brand equity¹⁴, as well as the heart and soul of the brand. In order to create a successful brand, it must be provided with a soul. There is the need to focus on the creation of a strong and coherent brand identity in order to maximise the strength of the brand.

Aacker warns of four main traps that firms fall into, in the context of brand identity⁶, ending in dysfunctional brand strategies or an excessively narrow tactical focus: brand image trap, brand position trap, external perspective trap, and product-attribute fixation trap.

Brand image, i.e., how customers perceive the brand, is important to brand identity, but the main trap is making the mistake of identifying the brand image with the brand identity when image is just an aspect of identity. Falling into this trap shows when there are some image inadequacies caused by consumers' past experiences, or by changes in their

needs, so the image no longer transmits or communicates its identity statement¹¹.

Brand position is defined by Aacker⁴ as the 'part of the brand identity and value proposition that is to be actively communicated to the target audience and that demonstrates an advantage over competing brands'. It is related to the communicative aspects of the identity to the customers and to the statement related to the brand. The second trap consists of considering the brand position as the main brand identity, eliminating all those aspects that are not considered worth communicating. When communicating the brand position, if it is believed to be the brand identity, there is a tendency to stress the product attributes, while forgetting to show the personality of the brand, the symbols connected to it, or the associations with the company's values and vision.

The third trap consists of the lack of understanding of the importance of the role of brand identity.

[The] external perspective trap takes place when the company does not manage to understand the basic values and purpose of identity of a brand. The trap consists in the lack of coherence between creating an image and not believing in the values. If the company is not able to communicate what the brand stands for or what it is about by specifying the strengths, values and vision based on disciplined efforts, it is hard to expect employees to make a vision happen if they do not understand and buy into that vision¹¹.

In order to have the values of the brand exposed outside or externalised – giving strength to the brand itself – employees' responses and buy-ins should be inspired by a strong brand identity.

The last trap is the product-attribute fixation. This means that the company focuses exclusively on the product's attributes, erroneously assuming that they are the only elements in the decision-making process of the consumer or customer.

This trap occurs when consumer insight is focused on the attributes of the product. According to Aacker¹¹, this kind of market research is conducted in such a way that marketing information is 1) often effective, as the attributes are important to purchasing choices; 2) easy, as customers have to talk about something tangible (the physical attributes of the product) and do not end up in irrationality; and 3) a reassurance for managers, since customers use a logical model to evaluate brands, so decisions are easier to understand and behaviours can be predicted

(even if most of the choices are irrational or governed by many variables, rational and emotional).

A sixth factor of brand success consists of the way a brand communicates. Aaker [1] maintains that a brand, in order to be successful, should be able to express its identity through the consideration of the brand as a product, an organisation, a person and a symbol.

The goal for these levels of consideration is justified by helping 'the strategist consider different brand elements and patterns that can help clarify, enrich, and differentiate an identity', but 'not every brand identity needs to employ all or even several of these perspectives. For some brands, only one will be viable and appropriate' [1]. The important point is that companies try to articulate what the brand should stand for in the minds and perceptions of the customers or consumers.

The seventh and eighth factors are connected to the creation of value and creativity [13, 16].

According to de Chernatony and McDonald [13], there are four main characteristics companies should take into consideration when developing brands, to show how a product can be augmented by adding value in increasing levels of sophistication. These characteristics are expressed in levels – generic, expected, augmented and potential.

The generic level consists of the fundamental form of commodity, in which the product satisfies the basic needs of the customer. This level might be, according to de Chernatony and McDonald, easy prey for competitors, as it is not difficult to copy.

Successful brands are supposed to be at a higher level, on a scale made of generic, expected, augmented and potential levels. The 'expected' level, where the 'commodity is value engineered to satisfy a specific target's minimum purchase conditions, such as functional capabilities, availability, pricing, etc.' [13]. There, repeat purchases result from a higher level of customer orientation in the firm.

The augmented level comes next, as customer sophistication increases. This level is more refined than the previous ones, and the added value can be found in non-functional elements (e.g., emotional). At this level, the product might satisfy needs such as social standing or status by ownership of it.

With regards to the potential level, according to the authors, the only limit is the limit of creativity. For example, Nestlé pushed the brand to the potential level through the development of software, so retailers could manage shelf space, thereby maximising their profits by helping their customers to maximise theirs. At this level, the company focuses

on diversifying in order to avoid stepping back to the expected level of competing on price.

Creativity is always a significant element in the brand-building process, besides the characteristics related to the level of sophistication of the market. The need for creativity is sustained by Frank and Krake's [16] argument:

Set the building and management of your brand high on your list of priorities. Make time available for this. A strong brand is an excellent way to distinguish yourself from your competition and, if properly applied, emphasise the quality of your product... Highlight one or two specific distinguishing product features and associate them with your brand... So be creative. And if you cannot be creative, hire someone who is [16].

However, it is not clear if highlighting one or two specific distinguishing product features is enough to lead to success. This might be true in a commodity market, but it contradicts de Chernatony and McDonald (2001) if it is extended to all markets, because an increase corresponds with a shift in the drivers to the purchase of the brand from product features to emotional elements.

De Chernatony and McDonald [13] promote the idea that

to succeed in the long run, a brand must offer added values over and above the basic product characteristics, if for no other reason than that functional characteristics are so easy for competitors to copy... It is most important to realize that the added values must be relevant to the customer and not just to the manufacturer or distributor.

'Buyers perceive added value in a brand', de Chernatony and McDonald add, 'because they recognize certain clues which give signals about the offer'.

As indicated by the body of literature described in these sections, branding is an essential element in firms' marketing. Scholarship depicts branding in companies as a powerful marketing tool they can use to communicate the value they offer to consumers. Brands may have an impact on growth, due to their communication role.

This chapter described branding for SMEs. Although branding is a marketing activity typical of larger organisations, more and more SMEs create brands. Section 9.1 dealt with brands' functionality and the branding activity per se, looking at different definitions of branding

depending of the many branding functions that there are. The element of 'value', paramount to the understanding of branding, is highlighted. Section 9.2 described the reason for having a specific mission statement to give direction to the organisation, but also to position the idea of what the company stands for clearly in the mind of customers and consumers. The last section described the importance of branding for firms and the factors to consider for successful branding activity.

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