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A literature review and future agenda for B2B branding: Challenges of branding in a B2B context

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ABSTRACT

The existing body of research knowledge on brand management has been predominantly derived from business-to-consumer markets, particularly fast moving consumer goods and has only recently started to expand in other contexts. Branding in business-to-business markets has received comparatively little attention in the academic literature due to a belief that industrial buyers are unaffected by the emotional values corresponding to brands. This paper provides a critical discussion of the fragmented literature on business-to-business branding which is organized in five themes: B2B branding benefits; the role of B2B brands in the decision making process; B2B brand architecture; B2B brands as communication enablers and relationship builders; and industrial brand equity. Drawing on the gaps and contradictions in the literature the paper concludes by proposing an agenda for future research.

1. Introduction

Branding is a discipline that has emerged from the consumer goods domain particularly fast moving consumer goods (FMCG). Historically, brand has been inextricably linked to the product (e.g. Gardner & Levy, 1955) and branding is seen as the process of adding value to the product (Farquhar, 1989). A brand is a cluster of functional and emotional benefits that extend a unique and welcomed promise (de Chernatony & McDonald, 2003). This conceptualization of a brand is universal and applies to various domains including FMCG, internet services and B2B (de Chernatony & Christodoulides, 2004; Lynch & de Chernatony, 2007). What changes in every context is the enactment of the brand. It is argued that the concept of a brand is universal however some adjustments are required in line with the specific context applied; in this case the B2B context.

Branding has myopically been viewed by business marketers as largely irrelevant to business markets. Associated mostly with emotional value, branding was believed to offer very little to what is traditionally considered a very rational process i.e. the organizational decision making process (Robinson, Faris, & Wind, 1967). More recent research acknowledges that despite the differences between B2C and B2B contexts (e.g. fewer and larger buyers in B2B markets) both B2C and B2B brands need to engender trust and develop both cognitive and affective ties with stakeholders (Lynch & de Chernatony, 2004). Various changes in the business environment such as the increasing homogeneity of product quality and the decreasing number of personal relationships due to digital communications have also lead to an increase in the interest in B2B branding (Baumgarth, 2010).

The paper makes an attempt to bring together the fragmented body of research on B2B branding. Through a systematic and critical review we identify contradictions and gaps in the pertinent literature and propose an agenda to push B2B branding research forward. It is noted that the majority of studies on the subject were predominantly published in the last decade with a substantial research stream appearing in the literature only very recently (e.g. Gupta, Melewar, & Bourlakis, 2010a, 2010b; Ohnemus, 2009; Roper & Davies, 2010; Wise & Zednickova, 2009; Zablah, Brown, & Donthu, 2010; Zaichkowsky, Parlee, & Hill, 2010). The paper is organized in five sections. It opens by reviewing the main benefits and problems associated with B2B branding. It then focuses on the decision-making process of industrial buyers by highlighting the relative importance of brand as an evaluation criterion as well as the role of the decision making unit and nature of the buyer in branding decisions. Next we examine alternative brand architecture options for B2B organizations and contextualize branding within a relationship marketing paradigm. The last section of the literature review focuses on the concept of brand equity by discussing the applicability of consumer-based brand equity models in a B2B setting. The paper concludes with a proposed agenda for future research.

2. The benefits of branding in industrial markets

Branding in an industrial market must be perceived to convey benefits to various stakeholders for companies to financially invest in

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it. With regard to the company investing in branding a number of benefits have been identified. Cretu and Brodie (2007) found branding had a positive impact on the perceived quality of the product or service. It was also perceived as providing a product with an identity, a consistent image and as conferring uniqueness (Michell, King, & Reast, 2001). A strong brand will be demanded, it may be placed on the bid list and allow companies to demand a premium price (Michell et al., 2001; Low & Blois, 2002; Ohnemus, 2009). Due to the demand of the branded products competitive products will be rejected (Low & Blois, 2002; Ohnemus, 2009). However, the assumption that competitive products will be rejected suggests that there is only one strong brand in the market or the cost of purchasing the other brands is significantly higher which may not necessarily be true. In bidding situations a branded product may be more readily placed on the bid list, it may help achieve consensus in the decision making unit and it can sway a bidding decision (Wise & Zednickova, 2009). It is suggested that when products or services are branded, communications will be accepted more readily (Michell et al., 2001; Low & Blois, 2002; Ohnemus, 2009). Once a strong brand has been developed it can be built upon and developed (Low & Blois, 2002). Hutton (1997) found that positive evaluations for one branded product category were transferred to another product category of the same brand. A strong brand may increase the company's power in the distribution network and open up opportunities for licensing (Low & Blois, 2002; Ohnemus, 2009). It may also raise the barriers to entry for other companies (Michell et al., 2001). When a company has a strong brand the company itself may be worth more if sold (Low & Blois, 2002). The marketers of an industrial brand may perceive their customers to have an increased level of satisfaction (Low & Blois, 2002) and to be more loyal (McQuiston, 2004). Finally, strong B2B brands are more likely to receive referrals (Hutton, 1997; Bendixen, Bukasa, & Abratt, 2004).

With regard to industrial buyers research has found brands to convey a number of largely intangible benefits. As a brand is essentially a summary of associated values it can increase the buyer's confidence in their choice (Michell et al., 2001; Low & Blois, 2002). It increases the level of satisfaction the buyer feels with regard to the purchase (Low & Blois, 2002) and provides comfort and the "feel good" factor (Mudambi, 2002). Brands are useful for reducing the level of perceived risk and uncertainty in buying situations (Mudambi, 2002; Bengtsson & Servais, 2005; Ohnemus, 2009). The buying company's product may gain legitimacy through the incorporation of a branded product and being associated with a reputable company. Table 1 summarizes the benefits of branding for B2B suppliers and buyers.

3. The problems with B2B branding

Despite the number of benefits a strong brand can convey to both the seller and the buyer, it is surprising that many industrial companies are not utilizing it. There are a number of reasons why there is a lack of branding amongst B2B companies. There is a lack of academic research in B2B branding, whereas there has been a vast amount of research into branding in a B2C context (Lynch & de Chernatony, 2004; Ohnemus, 2009). B2B branding does not seem to be an important issue according to research it is perceived as gimmicky (McDowell Mudambi, Doyle, & Wong, 1997) and it has been suggested that the practice of branding industrial products is impractical due to companies having thousands of products (Bendixen et al., 2004). It is not clear whether B2B branding will increase the financial reward. Building brand equity involves a long term financial investment. In the current economic climate making a long term commitment often at the expense of short term business profitability is not a sacrifice that many B2B marketers would readily make. This would potentially lead to financial problems for the company (Balmer, 2001 and Gronroos, 1997). The fact that even basic questions regarding the perceptions of B2B branding, the level of branding that should be used in a B2B context and whether the investment will generate financial reward means that the much of the research in B2B branding has little or no theoretical underpinnings (Ohnemus, 2009). As a result companies will find it difficult to implement any information they do obtain on B2B branding. Academic research needs to develop knowledge about branding in a B2B context in a cohesive, coherent manner in order to eliminate these problems and enable B2B marketers to make informed decisions about their brand strategy.

Table 1
Benefits of B2B Branding for Suppliers and Buyers.

Benefits for Buyers		Benefits for Suppliers
higher confidence	**Strong B2B Brand**	quality
risk/uncertainty reduction		differentiation
increased satisfaction		higher demand
greater comfort		premium price
identification with a strong brand		brand extensions
		distribution power
		barrier to entry
		goodwill
		loyal customers
		customer satisfaction
		referrals

Source: The authors (based on Cretu & Brodie, 2007; Hutton, 1997; Michell et al., 2001; Low & Blois, 2002; Ohnemus, 2009; McQuiston, 2004; Mudambi, 2002; Bengtsson & Servais, 2005; Wise & Zednickova, 2009).

4. Branding in the decision making process

Branding is essentially used to convey a set of values to potential buyers which may be considered at various stages of the organizational decision making process including the determination of the characteristics of the product or service, the search for potential suppliers and the evaluation of proposals (Sweeney, 2002). In addition to understanding the process of the decision making Lynch and de Chernatony (2004) state that it is necessary to understand the structure of the decision making unit and the evaluative criteria used to make purchase decisions. It is also necessary to understand the characteristics of the purchase situation and the nature of the organizational buyers. An understanding of these aspects of organization buying will enable marketers to determine how branding can be successfully implemented.

4.1. The evaluation criteria used by industrial buyers

For industrial companies to consider investing in branding it needs to be a criterion which buyers are going to consider when they are making purchase decisions. The criteria buyers use to evaluate suppliers' products has been investigated. Branding has been found to have a limited influence on organizational decision making (Bendixen et al., 2004; Zablah et al., 2010). Bendixen et al. (2004) found that branding only had a relative importance of 16% when buyers were deciding to make a purchase decision. Other attributes were found to be more important including delivery period (27% relative importance) the most desired attribute, followed by price (24%), technology (19%) and finally the availability of parts (14%). Zablah et al. (2010) found branding to be secondary to pricing, logistics, and service. Clarification of what constitutes a B2B brand is needed as evaluative criteria used to select suppliers such as perceived quality may be an important facet of brand equity rather than an independent criterion.

Bendixen et al. (2004) investigated how buyers rated nine attributes of their preferred brand. They found quality was the most desirable attribute, followed by reliability, performance, after-sales service, ease of operation, ease of maintenance, price, supplier's reputation, relationship with supplier's personnel. Abratt (1986) and Aaker (1991) also found quality to be one of the leading criterion for buyers. With regard specifically to B2B brands Roper and Davies

(2010) examined whether any of the dimensions of brand personality (agreeableness, enterprise, chic, confident, competence, ruthlessness, machismo and informality) as measured by the corporate character scale were related to customer satisfaction. They found the brand personality dimensions competence (conscientiousness, drive, technology) and agreeableness (warmth, empathy, integrity) predicted customer satisfaction. Further to this, Beverland, Napoli, and Lindgreen (2007) examined global B2B brands and concluded that what leading brands shared in common was that they built an identity around adaptability to customer needs and the provision of a total solution. If an industrial marketer wanted to create a strong brand, these are the factors they should be aiming to convey and they are broad enough to be applicable to a number of sectors. The impact of each of the criterion variables on the buyers' levels of satisfaction, risk etc. would need to be determined. This would entail a marketer to adapt their message to the customer. Research also needs to be carried out to determine how the relative importance of each of the criterion varies across industrial sectors.

4.2. The influence of role in the DMU on the evaluation criteria

In an industrial setting there is often more than one person involved in the purchase decision. Potentially the importance of different criteria will vary according to the role of each of these people in the decision making unit. Bendixen et al. (2004) looked at the relative importance of attributes to each role player in the decision making unit and found that technical specialists were the only ones to rank "brand name" as the most important attribute (24% relative importance), equally placed with price. Users were the only ones to rank "brand name" as the most important attribute (28% relative importance). Buyers perceived brand name as having a relative importance of 16% and gatekeepers 7%. Price was the most important attribute to all the roles in the decision making unit. Similarly, Alexander, Bick, Abratt, and Bendixen (2009) looked at the roles in the DMU and the importance of brand and found 48% of deciders and 42% of users assigned the greatest importance to brand. Technical specialists, users and deciders who have detailed product knowledge and/or considerable experience of using the product are more capable of differentiating between the good brands and poor brands

4.3. The nature of the business buyer

Based on the literature business-to-business buyers are different from consumer buyers in that they are profit-motivated and budget constrained (Webster & Keller, 2004). The nature of the person involved in the buying decision may mean they are more or less receptive to the concept of branding. Mudambi (2002) surveyed 116 buyers and found three clusters. The Highly Tangible buyers made up 49% ($n=57$) perceived price and product information to be more important in their purchase decisions whilst the more intangible aspects were less important. These buyers perceived themselves to be more knowledgeable and more objective. They were more likely to rank or formally rate suppliers. The Branding Receptive cluster (37%, $n=43$) rated the branding elements significantly more important to them than the other clusters. The Low Interest group (14%, $n=16$) rated none of the attributes investigated as more important than the other clusters. Mudambi (2002) has found that branding is something that is not going to be equally important to all purchasers.

In addition to the characteristics of the individuals, the characteristics of the company may have an effect on the importance of branding. Buyers in smaller companies have been found to be more likely to form strong brand preferences than buyers in larger companies. This may be explained by smaller companies having fewer resources to employ at the search and evaluation stages of the decision making process leading them to form strong brand preferences (Zablah et al., 2010). Organizational culture is also perceived as being a key contributor to brand success (de Chernatony & Cottam, 2008).

B2B2C interactions are also worth examining in the context of branding. For instance, it is often the case that a B2C firm may enter a co-branding alliance with a B2B brand due to the perceived importance of branding for the end consumer. This has been the case with PC part manufacturers (e.g. chips and processors- see Intel and Pentium) which were required by market forces to brand their components thereby adding considerable value to satisfy B2C buyers who would then use them as ingredients in the development of their brands (Erevelles, Stevenson, Srinivasan, & Fukawa, 2008).

4.4. The characteristics of the purchasing decision and the influence of branding

The characteristics of the buying situation may affect the importance of branding in a purchase decision. McDowell Mudambi et al. (1997) suggested that branding in B2B might be more important in a complex buying situation. Where there is a degree of uncertainty such as need uncertainty or technical uncertainty, branding may become more important as an evaluation criterion (McDowell Mudambi et al., 1997). Similarly, as the degree of risk increases, whether to the individual or the organization the importance of branding may increase (Bengtsson & Servais, 2005). The criticality of a product may affect the importance of branding. A branded product may be preferred if is a crucial component. Individually these factors may increase the importance of brand as an evaluative criterion but if there are a number of them in a buying situation brand importance may increase significantly.

Within the decision making process, the nature of the buyer, the characteristics of the customer company and the nature of the purchase situation all individually influence the importance of branding but there may also be various interactions which influence the decision. For example a brand receptive buyer in a small company faced with a risky purchase may be strongly influenced by brand. Further research is required to identify the nature of the interactions between the aforementioned variables on the influence of branding in a purchase situation.

5. Brand architecture: product branding vs corporate branding

It is not clear at what level B2B companies should be branding. There is an assumption that B2B companies should brand at the product level as in consumer markets, however this is not necessarily going to be feasible with the product variations, the short product life cycles that may exist in some industries or the production of customized products (Baumgarth, 2010). Indeed, it is thought in B2B that corporate brands are more important than product brands (Aspara & Tikanen, 2008). Research has found that 31% of companies concentrated on a corporate brand strategy, whilst 47% combined corporate branding and other levels of the branding hierarchy (Richter, 2007 cited Baumgarth, 2010). Research is needed to determine when companies should be branding products or product lines rather than taking a corporate branding approach. It is also necessary to determine when companies should be using a multiple level branding strategy e.g. combining a corporate and product line branding strategy.

A strong corporate brand will provide customers with a positive perception of the qualities the company wants to be associated with. The aim is to instill confidence in potential customers as to the supplier's quality, reliability, integrity etc. and create an impression of trustworthiness (Bengtsson & Servais, 2005). This will be created through corporate branding and PR. It will also be confirmed or not through word of mouth from customers past and present. Corporate brand and reputation have been differentiated by researchers. Mudambi (2002) suggests that reputation refers to the image of the company perceived by all of its stakeholders whereas branding focuses on the how the company is perceived by its customers. Cretu and Brodie (2007) similarly to Mudambi perceive reputation as the combination of stakeholders' assessment as to whether the firm meets its commitments and reaches their expectations and whether they meet their identity claims. Wartick (2002) suggests that in looking at reputation companies can focus on the customers as they have the biggest influence. The concepts of corporate brand and corporate reputation differ in their audiences which raises the question as to whether they should be developed in slightly different ways or whether they can essentially be the same. Research is required to determine whether the various stakeholders' perceptions do differ and if so how. Customers perceive companies with a good reputation as more credible and trustworthy and as providing greater value (Wartick, 2002). Customers will also have more confidence in suppliers with a good reputation.

Bengtsson and Servais (2005) have a different perspective of corporate brands in that they perceive them as being about relationships. They perceive effective relationships to require a thorough knowledge of the company's own capabilities and an ability to listen and understand various audiences' requirements along with the ability to interact and create benefits. This interpretation of corporate branding is somewhat broad and not necessarily useful however the corporate brand may act as the reference point for a successful relationship with the organization. Further research is expected to assess when each type of relationship (i.e. with the brand or the organisational employee) is more valued by business buyers in the purchasing process. It may well be that smaller B2B firms rely more on face to face interaction with their customers whereas larger firms adopt a branding perspective approach to relationship building to maintain consistency.

6. Internal brand communication

Whatever level a company decides to brand at it is important that all the stakeholders share the values as this will ensure the perceptions of the brand are unified and strong (Ind, 1997, 1998; de Chernatony & Harris, 2000; Roper & Davies, 2010). It is vital that a company's employees share the same brand perceptions and can convey these to customers in a consistent manner, this may be achieved through training. Training is important in two respects; firstly, employees who perceived their training positively were more likely to perceive the corporate brand positively (Roper & Davies, 2010) and secondly, research has found that training leads to increased employee satisfaction and morale and improves their skills (Burden & Proctor, 2000). The employees' knowledge, skills, brand perceptions, treatment of the customer and management of the relationship have been found to influence the customers' perception of the brand (Chun & Davies, 2006; Roper & Davies, 2010). The idea of the employee as being responsible for conveying the brand is taken to the extreme by Gupta et al. (2010a, 2010b) who propose that brand relationships should be managed by the brand personified (i.e. a human representative of the brand). Whilst this might be an ideal there is a problem in achieving this consistently due to the individuality of the buyers and sellers and how they interact. Further research is required to determine the necessary internal communication practices required to generate consistent brand perceptions amongst a company's employees. It is not enough however to have consistent brand perceptions across employees; they also need to be conveyed to customers in a relatively consistent manner and be interpreted by customers in the desired way.

7. Branding in a relationship context

In a B2B context branding is potentially useful to buyers during the early stages of the decision making process (Webster & Keller, 2004). It may be useful in determining the characteristics and quantity of the needed item, in the search for and qualification of potential suppliers, in the acquisition and analysis of suppliers' proposals and in the evaluative stage of the purchase decision making process. Branding is potentially used only at the beginning of a relationship when the buyer is evaluating suppliers and differentiating between offerings. Contextually, the brand may be particularly important when the buyer lacks knowledge and experience of the supplier as it may be perceived as reducing risk and providing confidence in the purchase decision. Once the relationship is entered into what becomes important is whether the supplier can deliver on the most important selection criteria such as quality, delivery time etc. Of course the role of branding within a B2B relationship depends on how a B2B brand is defined. If B2B brand definition includes an emotional element such as trust (e.g. Lynch & de Chernatony, 2004) then the concept links into the development of relationships. There are a number of models describing how brands are constructed in the B2C context (e.g. Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993) but these have largely been untested in a B2B context which emphasizes the importance of relationships.

The nature of the relationship may affect the importance of branding. In the B2B context there is a continuum of relationships from transactional to long term, with an emphasis on developing long term relationships between suppliers and buyers (Hakansson, 1982). Hakansson (1982) found 70% of relationships to be greater than five years old and Ford et al. (2002) found 88% of relationships to be greater than five years old. The role of branding within the context of different types of relationships needs to be determined. Once a relationship becomes long term research needs to determine what role, if any, brand plays in maintaining the relationship. Its importance may diminish significantly as other factors such as reliability, trust, willingness to adapt become more important. In relationships which are more transactional or short term, branding may be more important in determining who to do business with. A buyer may repeatedly buy the same brand product which is used intermittently to minimise search costs etc. The nature of the relationship may interact with the characteristics of the buying situation and the nature of the individual to affect the importance of brand.

8. Industrial brand equity

The term brand equity emerged in the early 1980s to denote an intangible market-based relational asset that reflects bonds between the brand and its customers (Christodoulides & Chernatony, 2010). One of the most widely used definitions of brand equity is Aaker's (1991) who defines it as “a set of assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name and symbol, that add to or subtract from the value provided by a product or service to a firm and/or that firm's customers” (p.15). This definition implies that the brand value can be examined from two perspectives depending on the beneficiary of value (firm or customer). Research into firm-based brand equity has focused on the financial measurement of the brand asset. For marketers it is more important to understand the drivers of brand equity in different markets and most research in marketing has taken this direction (Christodoulides & Chernatony, 2010). Aaker (1991) identified five sources of brand equity which are (applicable across products and markets as he claims) namely brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality, brand loyalty and other proprietary assets such as patents and trademarks. It is notable that the first four sources of brand equity correspond to customer-based brand equity while patents and trademarks reflect firm-based brand equity. Keller (1993) focused on customer based brand equity (CBBE) which he defined as “the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand” (p.2). Brand knowledge is the main source of CBBE made up of brand awareness and brand associations. Keller (2003) has further identified four hierarchical levels for building a strong brand: from brand identity to brand meaning, brand responses and finally brand relationships.

In a business-to-business context, brand equity is gaining significant ground (Ohnemus, 2009). Business-to-business brands like IBM, Cisco, Oracle and Intel have managed to build substantial equity and today feature amongst the most valuable brands globally (Interbrand, 2010). Empirical research into brand equity attests to its existence in B2B markets. Bendixen et al. (2004) found that business-to-business buyers are willing to pay a price premium for their favorite brand which is a consequence of high brand equity. Other benefits of brand equity are willingness to extend the brand's goodwill to other product lines and willingness to recommend the brand to others (Bendixen et al., 2004).

Research has produced mixed results as to the composition and drivers of industrial brand equity as well as to the validity of consumer-based brand equity frameworks in B2B markets. Kuhn, Alpert, and Pope (2008) examined the applicability of Keller's (2003) CBBE pyramid to a B2B context. Their findings provided only partial support highlighting the particularities of B2B branding:

1. Evaluating the equity of the corporate/manufacturer brand is more relevant than measuring the equity of individual products or product lines.
2. Relationships with B2B representatives are more important than with product brands
3. Brand associations are mostly about product performance features.
4. The purchase process is more rational than emotive and therefore feelings are not so relevant
5. Sub-dimensions of imagery such as personality traits were not mentioned by respondents.

Fig. 1 shows Keller's (2003) original CBBE pyramid and also the modified CBBE pyramid for a B2B context proposed by Kuhn et al. (2008).

Jensen and Klastrup (2008) tested the applicability of a general model of customer based brand equity, originally developed by Martensen and Gronholdt (2004), in a B2B setting. Based on the model, customer brand relationships, which are questionably used as proxy for brand equity (these are theoretically distinct concepts), are determined by rational and emotional evaluations of the brand. Rational evaluations are in turn determined by associations of product quality, service quality and price while emotional evaluations are influenced by differentiation, promise and trust/credibility. Data collected from two groups of target audiences of an industrial pump manufacturer provided no support for the model in the specific context. Model modifications resulted in a distinct model based on which product quality, differentiation and trust/credibility are determinants of customer brand relationships for both samples. Price was further important to manufacturer buyers but not for consulting engineers. The findings suggest that the drivers of B2B customer-based brand are both rational and emotional providing support to earlier works on the importance of emotion in B2B markets (e.g. Lynch & de Chernatony, 2004).

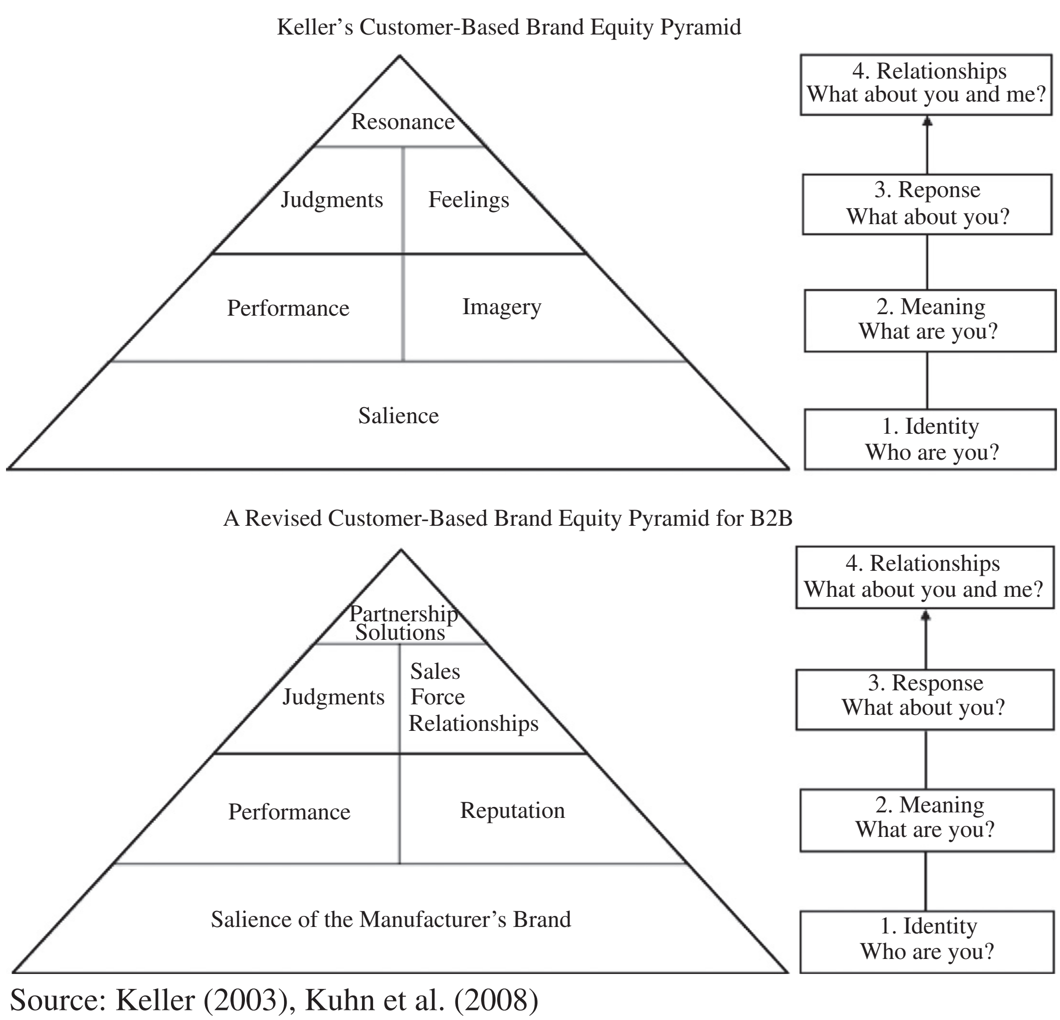

Fig. 1. Customer-based brand equity pyramids.

Zaichkowsky et al. (2010) examined the application of commercial tool, Young and Rubicam's Brand Asset Valuator (BAV), to a US engineering company. This tool which is extensively used in B2C markets captures four dimensions of customer's perceptions of a brand: relevance; esteem; differentiation; and knowledge. Although the authors are confident to suggest that BAV can be used in industrial markets to assess brand equity it is uncertain whether details about the adaptation of the original measuring instrument and the discriminant validity of the dimensions (low correlations and alpha scores reported) would actually lead to a different conclusion.

van Riel, de Mortanges, and Streukens (2005) developed a model of industrial brand equity that includes antecedents and consequences which they validate with data from 75 buyers of a multinational chemical company. This model decomposes industrial brand equity into product brand equity and corporate brand equity and postulates that product brand equity is determined by satisfaction with the product which is in turn affected by product value and product distribution. Corporate brand equity, on the other hand, is determined by buyers' satisfaction with the service which is in turn affected by service personnel and information services. Contrary to a significant stream of research (e.g. Aaker, 1991, 1996; Yoo & Donthu, 2001; Pappu, Quester, & Cooksey, 2005) that conceptualizes loyalty as a constituent dimension of brand equity, van Riel et al. (2005) hypothesize loyalty as an outcome of product and corporate brand equities.

Biedenbach and Marell (2010) drew on earlier research from Gordon, Calantone, and di Benedetto (1993) to empirically test propositions about the hierarchy of effects between dimensions of customer-based brand equity using data from a B2B services setting. The data which concerned evaluations of a big-four auditing firm in Sweden provided support for a hierarchy between associations, perceived quality and brand loyalty. The effect of brand awareness on brand associations was found to be insignificant. This may pertain to the measurement of awareness through a single item capturing self-reported logo recall. The same study found customer experience to positively influence brand equity dimensions.

Research on industrial brand equity has produced relatively limited research and mixed results as to the applicability of consumer-based brand equity models for business-to-business markets. Similarly, there is no agreement amongst researchers as to the dimensions that make up industrial brand equity and how the brand asset can be measured in a B2B context. Further research needs to shed light on the dimensionality and operationalization of industrial brand equity as well as investigate its antecedents and consequences in various B2B sectors.

9. Conclusions and directions for future research

This paper provides a literature review on B2B branding and identifies an agenda for future research. Our review of the pertinent literature has suggested that the academic inquiry on the subject is limited, fragmented and inconclusive. Whilst the mainstream B2C branding literature has almost unanimously embraced a multi-faceted perspective of brand that goes beyond the mere name and logo, the majority of B2B branding research still adopts a narrow and myopic view of the brand. We have identified five broad areas (B2B branding benefits; the role of B2B brands in the decision making process; B2B brand architecture; B2B brands as communication enablers and relationship builders; and industrial brand equity) within which we need to have more systematic and rigorous research to develop further understanding of how branding can be applied in a B2B context. The basic research questions that need to be addressed under each theme are outlined in Table 2 and discussed in more detail below.

Although as stated earlier the conceptualization of a brand may be universal it is necessary to identify exactly how it needs to be adjusted in a B2B environment. Research is required to determine the relevance of branding to various types of B2B buyers, identify how B2B buyers perceive branding and the relative importance of the functional and emotional attributes that will enable marketers to convey a more appropriate message.

Research is needed to confirm the stages in the B2B decision making process that branding is likely to be influential. Marketers need to know whether the nature of the purchasing situation moderates the influence of the brand at various stages of the decision making process. Factors such as level of risk, uncertainty, product criticality may all affect the importance of the B2B brand. This information will enable marketers to develop brand communications for the specific purchase situations.

Whilst research has found different members of the decision making unit assign differing values to the brand (Bendixen et al., 2004; Alexander et al., 2009), this needs to be examined in the context of different purchase situations. For example, do users perceive brands to be important across a whole range of purchase decisions?

Table 2
B2B branding: future research directions.

Theme	Further research directions
The B2B brand concept	• Is the concept of a brand the same in a B2B and B2C concept? • What does "brand" mean to marketers, buyers and other stakeholders in industrial markets? • Is the concept of a brand as a cluster of functional and emotional benefits applicable in a B2B context? • What is the relative importance of functional and emotional brand values to B2B buyers?
The decision making process -	• In what types of purchase situations is the brand more/less salient? • How do factors such as risk, uncertainty, product criticality influence the importance of branding and how do they interact? • What characteristics of the customer company influence the degree of consideration given to branding?
Brand architecture	• In what conditions should B2B organizations adopt product vs. product line vs. corporate branding strategies? What are the barriers to branding in B2B organizations?
Internal brand communication	• Are buyers perceiving the brand as companies want them to? How relevant are concepts such as brand image and brand personality in communicating B2B brand benefits? • What internal company processes are required to generate consistent brand perceptions amongst employees? • What processes will enable employees to convey a consistent brand image to industrial buyers?
Brand relationships	• What is the importance of branding for different stages of the decision making process? • Is the brand only important at the initial stages of the decision making process prior to the development of a relationship? • In what B2B buying situations are brand relationships preferred over supplier relationships? • How does the nature of the relationship i.e. transactional vs. long term affect the importance of brand?
Brand equity	• What are the components of industrial brand equity? • To what extent are frameworks of consumer-based brand equity applicable to B2B markets? What adaptations do they require? • How can industrial brand equity be measured? • What are its antecedents and consequences?

Source: The authors.

The influence of company characteristics such as size on the perceived importance of brand also need to be considered.

Research has found that 31% of B2B companies take a corporate brand strategy whilst 47% take a mixed level approach to branding strategy (Richter, 2007 cited Baumgarth, 2010). However, B2B companies need to be able to identify what level brand strategy they should adopt and what factors affect the effectiveness the level of the strategy. Whilst it is assumed that B2B companies will want to adopt a branding strategy, there may be factors preventing this which need to be investigated in future research. It would be useful for example to determine what factors i.e. company, buyer, market, environment etc. inhibit the implementation or reduce the effectiveness of a B2B brand strategy.

Within an organization it has been found that training enhances customers' perceptions of the brand (Chun & Davies, 2006; Roper & Davies, 2010). Further research is needed to clarify the process of how individuals within a company can convey a consistent brand message to buyers. Companies may need to conduct research to establish whether their brand is being conveyed as desired. If there is a discrepancy between the supplier's and buyers' perceptions the supplier's brand communications employees need to be made aware of the discrepancy and resolve it.

There are a number of issues that require clarification between the role of the B2B brand in the buyer-seller relationship. The type of relationship between the supplier and buyer may affect the importance of the brand; within transactional relationships the B2B brand may be more important whereas in long term relationships the brand may be less. The nature of the relationship will also interact with the decision making process and its characteristics to influence the importance of branding. For example in a long term relationship with a supplier, a buyer purchasing a new product may assign greater importance to the relationship with the individual than the brand. In addition it would be useful to know how in different stages of the relationship lifecycle, the buyer perceives the importance of the relationship with the brand, the individual and the company.

It is crucial to systematically address the research questions in each of the areas and to subsequently investigate how these areas interact to fully determine how B2B organizations develop, communicate, manage and evaluate their brands and how buyers interpret, select and resonate with brands.

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