

Significance of corporate brand for business-to-business companies

Jaakko Aspara, Helsinki School of Economics, Finland*

Henrikki Tikkanen, Helsinki School of Economics, Finland

The purpose of the article is to clarify why the importance of corporate brand, in contrast to brands in general or product brands, is emphasized in the business-to-business (B2B) context. The conceptual elaboration is based on literatures on industrial/B2B brands and organizational buying behaviour, as well as service marketing, customer solutions, relationship marketing, industrial networks and relationships, and personal selling. The article posits that the significance of corporate brand will be emphasized for B2B companies, since business customers tend to assess, value, and make purchasing decisions based on company-specific images/perceptions, such as those about the company's product delivery performance and product range; servicing capabilities and performance; consultative expertise/capabilities, processes, and performances; strategic network position; intentions to reciprocally partner and cooperate with customers; and customer-facing (sales) personnel and their behavior.

Keywords Corporate brands, Industrial brands, B2B brands, Organizational buying behaviour

Introduction

Recent years have witnessed growing interest in industrial/business-to-business (B2B) brands (Lynch and De Chernatony 2007; Michell, King and Reast 2001; Thompson, Knox and Mitchell 1998; Bendixen, Bukasa and Abratt 2004; Mudambi 2002; van Riel, Pahud de Mortanges and Streukens 2005; Taylor, Celuch and Goodwin 2004). Furthermore, there has been increasing interest in *company/corporate* brands, in general (e.g., Aaker 2004; Balmer 1995, 2001; Balmer and Soenen 1999; De Chernatony 1999, 2001; Gregory 2007; Harris and De Chernatony 2001; Hatch and Schultz 2001, 2003; Ind 1997; Macrae 1999; Roper and Davies 2007; Urde 1999; Wilson 2001), as well as in the B2B context (e.g. Lynch and De Chernatony 2004; Bendixen, Bukasa and Abratt 2004; Mudambi 2002; van Riel, Pahud de Mortanges and Streukens 2005). Also anecdotal evidence suggests that B2B companies have increasingly taken corporate brand management initiatives in recent years.

*Correspondence details and biographies for the authors are located at the end of the article.

Indeed, the research has implied that rather than brands in general or product brands, particularly corporate brands are important in the B2B context (e.g., Bendixen, Bukasa and Abratt 2004; Mudambi 2002; van Riel, Pahud de Mortanges and Streukens 2005). This seems consistent with the established finding that organizational/business customers' purchasing decisions are significantly influenced by supplier companies' images/reputations (e.g. Kauffmann 1994; Lehmann and O'Shaughnessy 1974; Möller and Laaksonen 1986; Levitt 1965; Shaw, Giglierano and Kallis 1989).

However, there seems to be confusion in conceptualizations of brand and corporate brand in B2B research. Notably, when evoking the concept of "brand", many pieces of earlier research have lacked consistency in whether they are referring either to product-specific (brand) images or to company/corporation-specific (brand) images (see e.g. Michell, King and Reast 2001; Thompson, Knox and Mitchell 1998; Bendixen, Bukasa and Abratt 2004; Mudambi 2002; van Riel, Pahud de Mortanges and Streukens 2005; Gordon, Calantone and Di Benedetto 1993; Taylor, Celuch and Goodwin 2004). For instance, Mudambi et al. (1997) fail to be clear about whether they, with their concept of "brand-associated value", refer to the value that industrial buyers associate with product brands or with (corporate brands of) supplier companies. Michell, King, and Reast (2001), in turn, look into how manufacturers of industrial products perceive the benefits of product branding. However, when looking into potential "brand loyalty", they point to many images that are clearly (supplier) company-specific, such as reliability, performance, service, product availability, and sales relationships. Even more confusingly, Thompson et al. (1998: 25) state that, in their study, they "*do not differentiate between product/service brands and the company as brand*". Finally, other studies (e.g. Hague, Jackson 1994; Hutton 1997; Bendixen, Bukasa and Abratt 2004; Mudambi 2002) are conceptually confusing in the sense of that they apply the simple terms "brand" and "branding" although they can be seen to be dealing rather categorically with *corporate* brands and company images.

Partly because of this apparent confusion, it has not been clear why the significance of corporate brands, in the broad sense of company-specific perceptions/images in customers' minds, is emphasized in the B2B context, beyond product brands and product-specific perceptions/images. In this article, we seek to clarify this conceptually by explicating the significant elements of corporate brand in the B2B markets, i.e. the company-specific brand perceptions/images which business customers often assess, value, and base their purchase decisions on.

Our conceptual elaboration is based on various streams of earlier research, including industrial/B2B brands and organizational buying behaviour (e.g. Kim et al. 1998; Mudambi, Doyle and Wong 1997; van Riel, Pahud de Mortanges and Streukens 2005), as well as service brands (e.g. De Chernatony and Segal-Horn 2003; Dobree and Page 1990; Martínez and Pina 2005; McDonald, De Chernatony and Harris 2001), service marketing (e.g. Christopher, Payne and Ballantyne 1991; Crosby, Evans and Cowles 1990; Grönroos 1990; Berry and Parasuraman 1991), customer solutions (e.g. Davies, Brady and Hobday 2007; Tuli, Kohli and Bharadwaj 2007; Sawhney 2006; Slywotzky and Morrison 1998), relationship marketing (e.g. Anderson and Narus 1990; Brock Smith and Barclay 1997; Doney and

Cannon 1997; Morgan and Hunt 1994; Palmatier et al. 2006), industrial networks/relationships (e.g. Brito and Roseira 2007; Ford 1990; Håkansson and Snehota 1995; Mattsson 1985; Ford et al. 2003), and personal selling (e.g. Atuahene-Gima 1997; Dion, Easterling and Miller 1995; O'Shaughnessy 1971; Spiro, Perreault and Reynolds 1976; Stafford and Stafford 2003).

Regarding the scope of the article, it is to be noted that we concentrate on corporate brands with respect to the customer interface of a business-to-business company, i.e., business/organizational customers' corporate brand perceptions, rather than corporate brand directed towards various other stakeholders of a company, such as investors, NGOs, or employees (cf. Balmer 2001a; Balmer and Gray 2003; Bernstein 1989; King 1991; Roper and Davies 2007). This is because the customer interface characterized by business customers is what is essential about B2B companies (vs. B2C companies).

Supplier company-specific perceptions and organizational buying behavior

Organizational buying behaviour (OBB) literature makes the general point that organizational/business customers' purchasing decisions are often influenced by supplier companies' images or reputations (e.g. Kauffmann 1994; Lehmann, O'Shaughnessy 1974; Möller and Laaksonen 1986; Levitt 1965; Shaw, Giglierano and Kallis 1989). Building on OBB literature, Mudambi et al. (1997), in turn, introduce the related notion that industrial customers generally assess and value certain factors that they perceive to be associated to supplier companies' brands.

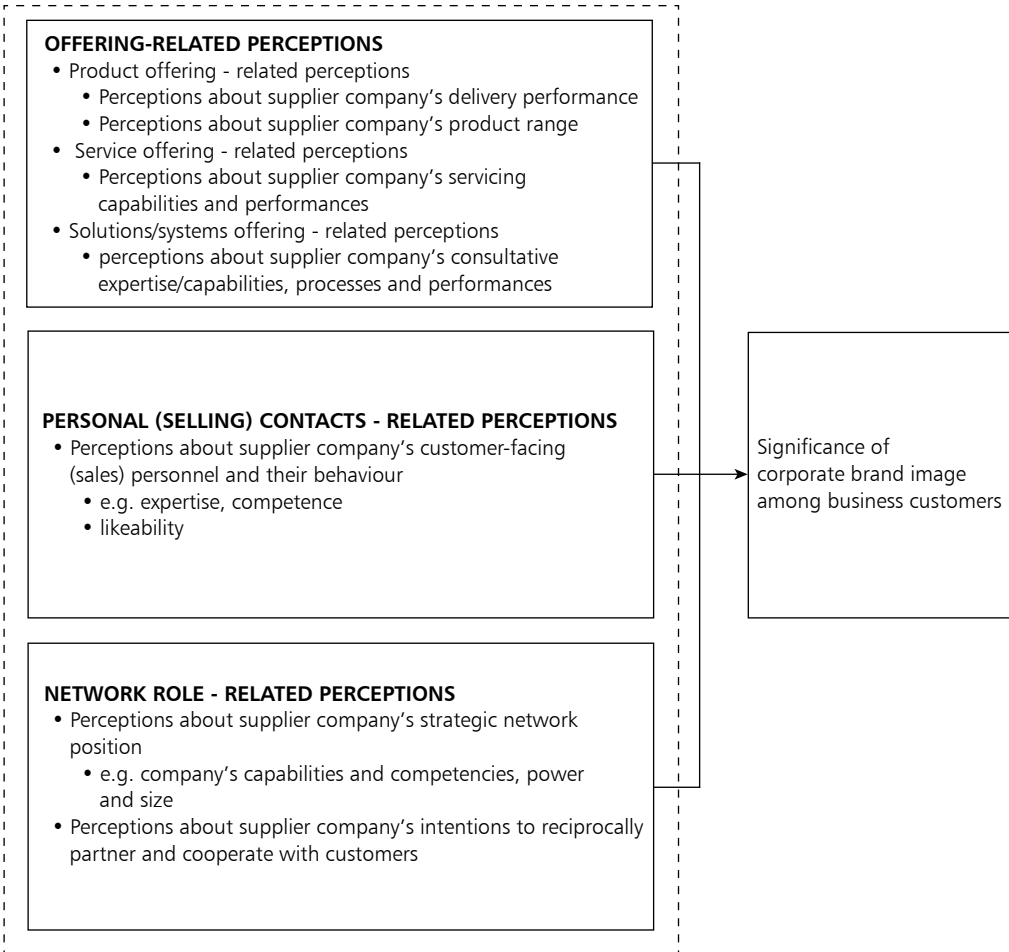
Although Mudambi et al. do not explicitly discuss corporate or company brands, many of the factors/attributes identified are supplier company-specific rather than product (brand)-specific. Among the supplier company-specific brand perceptions, Mudambi et al. (1997) identify distribution/delivery-related attributes of product offerings (see also Blombäck and Axelsson 2006; van Riel, Pahud de Mortanges and Streukens 2005) and (support) service provision attributes (see also Kim et al. 1998; van Riel, Pahud de Mortanges, and Streukens 2005). Beyond product and service offerings, Mudambi et al. further identify attributes related to a company's industry, such as financial stability and global coverage.

In what follows we explain in more detail the supplier company-specific brand perceptions which business customers often assess, value, and base their purchase decisions on. With respect to a company's offerings, we identify – in addition to the delivery-related perceptions of product offerings and (support) service offering perceptions identified by Mudambi et al. (1997) – perceptions related to a company's product range offering and consultative solutions/systems offering. Furthermore, we identify perceptions related to the company's personal selling contacts to customers, as well as perceptions related to the company's network role.

The supplier company-specific perceptions assessed and valued by business customers and, hence, explicating the significance of corporate brand for B2B companies, are summarized in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Significance of corporate brand image among business customers: perceptions about supplier company assessed/valued by business customers

Perceptions about supplier company assessed/valued by business customers



Corporate brand image among business customers

Offering-related perceptions

Product offering-related perceptions

Perceptions about product delivery. Beyond attributes pertaining strictly to products *per se*, business customers often assess, value, and make purchasing decisions based on attributes related to the delivery of products. These include e.g. ease of ordering, delivery times, delivery sizes, delivery availability, delivery reliability, delivery precision, delivery flexibility, and responsiveness to emergency orders (Helo 2004; Kumar and Motwani 1995; Michell, King and Reast 2001; Bendixen, Bukasa and Abratt 2004; Mudambi, Doyle and

Wong 1997; Blombäck and Axelsson 2006). These delivery-related attributes are naturally perceived as attributes of companies supplying the products rather than as attributes of the products themselves, which emphasizes the significance of corporate brand for B2B companies. Accordingly, also business customers' trust and commitment and, hence, loyalty and repeated/continued purchases as well as customer referrals (cf. Palmatier et al. 2006), may lean towards the company (brand) and the delivery attributes rather than products (brands).

As a special nuance it is also worth considering, however, that a business customer may sometimes tend to have trust especially in a specific production unit of a company, i.e., the delivery attributes of a specific production unit rather than those of the overall company. Usually the focal production unit is the one that has been delivering the products ordered by the customer, and the customer may demand his/her orders to be delivered continuously from the same, selected production unit. If excessive, customers' production unit-specific trust of this kind may be problematic if the company produces the product in various production units and wants to retain, for itself, the possibility to select the production unit that supplies and delivers individual customer orders, in order to optimize the company's overall performance, e.g. transportation costs, inventory costs, and delivery times (Noorul Haq and Kannan 2006; Pirkul and Jayaraman 1996; Vonderembse et al. 2006; Thomas and Griffin 1996). In order to retain this option for itself, reinforcing business customers' trust in the company as the supplier/deliverer of products, rather than trust in its specific production units, may be quite relevant for a B2B company. This further emphasizes the significance of corporate brand for B2B companies with multiple production units.

Perceptions about product range. Beyond attributes pertaining to individual products, business customers often assess, value, and make purchasing decisions based on the whole range or assortment of products offered by supplier companies (Dale 1995; Kirkup and Anderson 1987). The value that business customers sometimes perceive to obtain from the possibility of "one-stop shopping" is an extreme case of the role of the product range perceptions (e.g. Gossain and Kandiah 1998; Pires and Aisbett 2003). In any case, the product range is by definition a company-related attribute and will be perceived as such by customers, emphasizing again the significance of corporate brand for many B2B companies.

Service offering-related perceptions

Beyond tangible products, business customers often assess, value, and make purchasing decisions based on the intangible services offered by supplier companies. Typical services include installation services; maintenance, repair, and operation (MRO) services; technical services; site support services; product development, design, and testing support services; and modernization services, as well as financing services. Sometimes also the above-mentioned product delivery-related attributes, such as delivery times, sizes, availability/reliability, and flexibility, are considered as "service" (Mudambi, Doyle and Wong 1997). Services by their very nature involve interaction between the customer and the provider company, therefore emphasizing the significance of corporate brand (De Chernatony and Segal-Horn 2003; Dobree and Page

1990; Martínez and Pina 2005; McDonald, De Chernatony and Harris 2001). Indeed, the expected and perceived service quality and value are determined by the (servicing) activities, capabilities, and performances of the provider *company*, especially its customer-facing employees, technologies, and facilities (Bitner 1990; Christopher, Payne and Ballantyne 1991; Crosby, Evans and Cowles 1990; Grönroos 1990; Berry and Parasuraman 1991). As B2B companies often offer add-on services (or the whole offering may constitute a service), the significance of corporate brand is emphasized.

Solutions/systems offering-related perceptions

Beyond pre-developed products or services, business customers often also assess, value, and purchase consultative, solution-like or system-like offerings of supplier companies (Davies et al. 2004; Davies, Brady and Hobday 2006; Davies and Hobday 2005; Galbraith 2002; Tuli, Kohli and Bharadwaj 2007; Sawhney 2006; Shepherd and Ahmed 2000; Slywotzky 1996; Slywotzky and Morrison 1998; Wise and Baumgartner 1999). Specifically, what is assessed and valued here is (see Davies, Brady and Hobday 2007; Tuli, Kohli and Bharadwaj 2007):

- the understanding of the customer's business and past experience of working with customers facing similar situations
- the quality of the consultative processes of and advice in
 - analyzing/identifying/defining/specifying the customer's problems/needs/requirements
 - designing/customizing such integrative product(s)/service(s)/installation(s) that serve the needs, solve the problems, and correspond to the requirements;
- the coordination performance in implementing/installing/integrating the final product/service/installation.

In all these elements, the expertise, advice, processes, and performance specific to the supplier company, including its employees, have a more central role than any pre-developed product/service, which emphasizes the significance of corporate brand for many B2B companies with solution- or system-like offerings.

Personal (selling) contacts-related perceptions

Regardless of the type of offering, business customers usually engage in purchasing by having personal interactions with seller companies, which, in turn, engage in personal selling activities with their sales forces. With this being the case, business customers and their purchasing agents assess, evaluate, and make purchasing decisions also based on the customer-facing (sales) personnel of seller companies (Armstrong and Min Yee 2001; Chang 2006; Doney and Cannon 1997; Jap 2000; Reynolds and Arnold 2000; Reynolds and Beatty 1999). For instance, the expertise and competence (Busch, Wilson 1976; Crosby, Evans and Cowles 1990; Stafford and Stafford 2003; Taylor and Woodside 1981) of a salesperson are valued, as well as his/her overall likeability, attractiveness, and sociability – associated often with

the perception of the salesperson's similarity to oneself (e.g. appearance, lifestyle, socioeconomic status) (Crosby, Evans and Cowles 1990; Dion, Easterling and Miller 1995; O'Shaughnessy 1971; Spiro, Perreault and Reynolds 1976; Stafford and Stafford 2003; Wilson and Ghingold 1981).

Moreover, to the extent that business customers assess, value, and purchase service or consultative solutions/systems offerings, the role of their assessments and evaluations about the customer-facing (sales) personnel of seller companies is considerably emphasized, particularly in regards to the personnel's expertise/competence and performance (Anderson 2006; Berry 1995; Crosby, Evans and Cowles 1990; Doney and Cannon 1997; Guenzi 2002; Liu, Leach 2001; Rackham and DeVincentis 1999).

In any case, the assessments and evaluations about customer-facing personnel are highly specific to supplier companies rather than to products or services (brands), emphasizing the significance of corporate brand for B2B companies. Accordingly, rather than towards products (brands), business customers' trust, commitment, and affect and, hence, loyalty and repeated/continued purchases may also lean towards the company (brand) and its customer-facing employees (Doney and Cannon 1997; Foster and Cadogan 2000; Johnson, Barksdale and Boles 2003; Langerak 2001; Liu and Leach 2001; Mavondo and Rodrigo 2001; Palmatier et al. 2006; Swan, Bowers and Richardson 1999).

Yet, one must consider also that a business customer's trust in, commitment to, and liking for a customer-facing employee may even be overly emphasized, causing problems for the supplier company if the employee is replaced or the employee leaves the company (Anderson and Robertson 1995; Bove and Johnson 2000; Chun and Davies 2006; Guenzi and Pelloni 2004; Tellefsen and Thomas 2005; Bove and Johnson 2006; Yau et al. 2000). Thus, reinforcing business customers' trust in, commitment to, and liking for the company, instead of merely its customer-facing employees, becomes important, further emphasizing the significance of corporate brand for B2B companies.

Network role-related perceptions

Perceptions about strategic network position

Network approaches to business and industrial marketing suggest that beyond simply assessing products, services and other offerings made available by (supplier) companies, business customers assess the relative strategic roles, identities, and positions of other companies, within the overall industrial business network or value system (see e.g. Ford 1990; Håkansson and Snehota 1995; Ford et al. 2003). When making purchase decisions and hence assuming the role of a customer relative to other companies (and that of supplier to some others), a business organization will have perception of and assess the other companies' strategic network positions in terms of e.g., activities undertaken relative to others; distinct technologies, expertise, resources, capabilities, and competencies; and relative power and size (Anderson, Håkansson and Johanson 1994; Brito and Roseira 2007; Mattsson 1985; Thorelli 1986). These perceptions and assessments involve both categorizing companies according to typical network roles they assume – e.g., material provider, component manufacturer, assembler, manufacturing

service provider, support service provider, original equipment manufacturer, intermediary, distributor, end user – and analyzing the companies as representatives of those roles. In essence, then, the significance of corporate brand for a B2B company will be emphasized due to business customers' perceptions and assessments in regards to the relative network position of the supplier company. For instance, purchasing decisions are often heavily influenced by perceptions and assessments of supplier companies' unique technological capabilities and global sizes within their networks.

Perceptions about reciprocal intentions to cooperate and partner

As assumed in network approaches, as well as relationship marketing paradigm, besides engaging in transactional buying of specific products in the competitive market, business customers are often willing to engage in cooperative or partnership relationships with supplier companies that sell products to them (Anderson and Narus 1990, 1998; Gadde and Håkansson 2001; Grönroos 2004; Håkansson and Snehota 1995; Kotler and Armstrong 2005; Morgan and Hunt 1994; Ford et al. 2003). In other words, a business customer is often prepared to treat its supplier as a partner: have coordinated and complementary actions with it to achieve mutual goals (Anderson and Narus 1990; Morgan and Hunt 1994; Palmatier et al. 2006), as well as invest in the relationship, accept increased influence by and dependence on the supplier, have increased openness in communication, accept decreased control/dominance on its own behaviour, and decrease its own opportunism (Brock Smith and Barclay 1997). This preparedness to treat a supplier as a partner, however, usually requires that the business customer trusts that the supplier has reciprocal *intentions* to mutually cooperate and partner, as well (Brock Smith and Barclay 1997; Mayer, Davis and Schoorman 1995). Note that the supplier company's trustworthiness in this particular sense, concerning its perceived intentions, has an important role beyond the trustworthiness of the supplier company's actual offerings, capabilities (network position), and personnel (Brock Smith and Barclay 1997; Seppänen, Blomqvist and Sundqvist 2007). Thus, the significance of corporate brand for a B2B company will be emphasized due to business customers' perceptions of and assessments of the company's reciprocal *intentions* to cooperate and partner.

Discussion

Corporate B2B branding

Although earlier research has implied that especially corporate brands, rather than brands in general or product brands, are significant for B2B companies (e.g. Bendixen, Bukasa and Abratt 2004; Mudambi 2002; van Riel, Pahud de Mortanges, and Streukens 2005), it has not been clearly explicated why this would be the case. Also, earlier research on B2B brands has often failed to consistently refer with "brand" either to product brand images or to company/corporate brand images (e.g. Michell, King and Reast 2001; Thompson, Knox and Mitchell 1998; Bendixen, Bukasa and Abratt 2004; Mudambi 2002; Gordon, Calantone and Di Benedetto 1993; Taylor, Celuch and Goodwin 2004). In this article, we clarify why the significance of corporate brand will be emphasized for B2B companies. With a (supplier) company's "corporate

brand”, we consistently refer to images/perceptions that business customers may have of the company.

Specifically, we showed how the significance of corporate brand is emphasized for B2B companies, as business customers have a tendency to assess, value, and make purchasing decisions based on perceptions specifically related to supplier companies, in addition to or even instead of those related to individual products. First, with respect to a company’s offerings, there may be significant company-specific perceptions about product offerings (company’s product delivery and product range), service offerings (company’s servicing capabilities and performances), and solutions/systems offerings (company’s consultative expertise/capabilities, processes, and performances). Second, perceptions related to the company’s personal selling contacts to customers (e.g. likeability and expertise/competence of company’s salespersons) will be significant. Third, the significant company-specific perceptions include those about the company’s network role, particularly the company’s perceived strategic network position (e.g. activities undertaken relative to others; distinct technologies, expertise, resources, capabilities, and competencies; relative power and size), as well as the company’s perceived intentions to reciprocally partner and cooperate with the customer.

Importantly, besides single purchases, business customers’ whole trust, commitment, and affect and, hence, customer loyalty and repeated/continued purchases, as well as customer referrals, are likely to lean towards the above-mentioned supplier-company specific images/perceptions, rather than ones specific to individual products or product brands (cf. Kim et al. 1998; Palmatier et al. 2006). Indeed, most of the relevant supplier company -specific images/perceptions that we identified will have significance because business customers will have a fairly natural tendency to assess, value, and make purchasing decisions based on those images/perceptions – and base trust and commitment on the same images/perceptions.

It should be noted, however, that certain company-specific image and trust elements will have significance from the perspective of effective corporate management, even if potentially acting against certain natural tendencies of customers. For instance, customers may have the tendency to trust the product quality and deliveries of a certain production unit. In this case, reinforcing customers’ trust in the company, instead of the individual production units, may be important from the perspective of optimizing the company’s overall performance (e.g. transportation costs, inventory costs, and delivery times) by retaining the option to select the production unit supplying individual customer orders. Or, customers may have the tendency to be committed to individual customer-facing employees of the supplier, in which case reinforcing their commitment towards the company, instead of individual employees may be important from the perspective of being able to replace the employees (cf. Bove and Johnson 2000, 2006; Guenzi and Pelloni 2004; Tellefsen and Thomas 2005; Yau et al. 2000).

Role of employees

One can further consider the role of employees of the company, particularly insofar as the employees, with their behaviour, (a) constitute and reinforce the quality of the company’s service and solution/system offerings and (b) generally generate company sales through personal contacts to customers.

The significance of corporate branding is particularly emphasized for B2B companies here, since B2B companies often – in absolute terms as well as in comparison with B2C companies – provide service and/or solution/system offerings and have personal (selling) contacts to customers.

As implied in the discussion of a company's service and solutions/systems offerings, business customers' (a) assessments of, evaluations of, and purchasing decisions concerning a seller company's service offerings and consultative solution/system offerings are heavily based on their assessments and evaluations of the seller company's customer-facing (sales) personnel, especially the personnel's activities, expertise/competence, and performance. These are largely determined by the behaviour of the seller company's personnel when in contact with customers. Thus, the need for internal marketing/branding in its many senses (e.g. Cahill 1996; Grönroos 1981, 1983, 1990; Gummesson 1987; Berry and Parasuraman 1991) is emphasized for B2B companies offering services or solutions/systems. Recruitment, training, and incentives with regard to offering service and consultative solutions/systems have central roles. As an example, if the customer-facing personnel have not received proper training for servicing or consultative skills but only for technical product knowledge, they are unlikely to be able to make up service or solution/system offerings to customers. In addition, internal and external communication involving stories, myths, and stated values of ideal employee behaviour, as well as visual, verbal, and concrete symbols of the corporation, are important to the extent that they serve as ideal examples for employees and increase their identification with and commitment to the corporate service and solution/system offerings (Vallaster and De Chernatony 2006).

As implied in the discussion of a company's perceived personal selling contacts, in turn, business customers' (b) assessments, evaluations, and purchasing decisions are often based on their assessments and evaluations of the seller company's salespersons and their behaviour and communication (Lynch and De Chernatony 2004, 2007). Thus, even if the B2B company did not offer services or solutions/systems to customers, internal corporate marketing/branding is still highly important. As widely recognized by selling and sales management literatures, recruitment, training, and incentives have central roles. Furthermore, in addition to recruitment, training and incentives, internal and external communication involving stories, myths, and stated values of ideal corporate salesperson behaviour are important again, as well (Vallaster and De Chernatony 2006).

Managerial Implications

For B2B managers, the article essentially emphasizes the significance of corporate brand(ing). While it does not suggest that individual product/service brands are insignificant, it does suggest that managers of a B2B company should take into account that the company's business customers will have a tendency to assess, value, and make purchasing decisions based on images/perceptions pertaining to the company brand, such as

- perceptions about company's product delivery performance and product range (with respect to product offerings);

- perceptions about company's servicing capabilities and performances (with respect to service offerings);
- perceptions about company's consultative expertise/capabilities, processes, and performances (with respect to solution/system offerings);
- perceptions about company's strategic network position in terms of e.g. capabilities and competencies, power and size;
- perceptions about company's intentions to reciprocally partner and cooperate with customers;
- perceptions about company's customer-facing (sales) personnel and their behaviour.

Accordingly, B2B managers should realize that business customers' whole trust, commitment, and affect and, therefore, loyalty and repeated/continued purchases, as well as customer referrals, are likely to lean towards these supplier-company specific images/perceptions – in addition to or even instead of ones specific to individual products or product brands.

Thus, managers of B2B companies should ponder how their corporate brand is and will be strategically positioned along these company-specific image dimensions in the minds of individual customers, customers of certain type or segment, and markets in general. A company may find opportunities to differentiate from competitors along all of the dimensions, and differential advantage on, at least, some of the dimensions is likely to be important for the company's success in the B2B markets. In principle, the company's current positioning on the dimensions, i.e. images that customers/markets hold, can be exploited and/or new, more advantageous positioning can be pursued with targeted marketing actions.

Moreover, B2B managers should find out for themselves to what extent the trust, commitment, and affect of individual current customers, customers of certain segment, and markets in general is leaning towards each of the dimensions. Accordingly, the customers'/markets' current trust, commitment, and affect based on the respective dimensions can be exploited and/or the bending of customers' trust, commitment, and affect towards additional or alternative dimensions can be pursued with consistent marketing actions.

In conclusion, it is also important for B2B managers to understand the role of internal branding/marketing among the company's own customer-facing employees, particularly when it comes to having them constitute and reinforce the quality of the company's service and solution/system offerings, as well as generally generate company sales through personal contacts to customers. For instance, it should be ensured that the customer-facing employees truly understand and appreciate the central role of their own behaviour, and it is important that their familiarity with and interest in and commitment to the offerings of the corporation are reinforced. Then again, appropriate recruitment, training and incentives must be in place, as well as internal and external communication involving stories, myths, and stated values of ideal behaviour and visual, literal, and concrete corporate symbols.

References

- Aaker, D. A. (2004), "Leveraging the corporate brand", *California Management Review*, Vol. **46**, no. 3, pp. 6-18.
- Anderson, J. C. and Narus, J. A. (1990), "A model of distributor firm and manufacturer firm working partnerships", *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. **54**, no. January, pp. 42-58.
- Anderson, E. and Robertson, T. S. (1995), "Inducing multiline salespeople to adopt house brands", *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. **59**, no. 2, pp. 16-31.
- Anderson, J. C., Håkansson, H. and Johanson, J. (1994), "Dyadic business relationships within a business network context", *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. **58**, no. 4, pp. 1-15.
- Anderson, J. C. and Narus, J. A. (1998), "Business marketing: Understand what customers value", *Harvard Business Review*, Vol. **76**, no. 6, pp. 53-65.
- Anderson, J. R. (2006), "Managing Employees in the Service Sector: a Literature Review and Conceptual Development", *Journal of Business and Psychology*, Vol. **20**, no. 4, pp. 501-523.
- Armstrong, R. W. and Min Yee, S. (2001), "Do Chinese trust Chinese? A study of Chinese Buyers and Sellers in Malaysia", Vol. **9**, no. 3, pp. 63-86.
- Atuahene-Gima, K. (1997), "Adoption of New Products By the Sales Force: The Construct, Research Propositions and Managerial Implications", *Journal of Product Innovation Management*, Vol. **14**, no. 6, pp. 498-514.
- Balmer, J. M. T. (2001), "The three virtues and seven deadly sins of corporate brand management", *Journal of General Management*, Vol. **27**, no. 1, pp. 1-17.
- Balmer, J. M. T. (1995), "Corporate branding and connoisseurship", *Journal of General Management*, Vol. **21**, no. 1, pp. 24-46.
- Balmer, J. M. T. and Soenen, G. B. (1999), "The acid test of corporate identity management", *Journal of Marketing Management*, Vol. **15**, no. 1, pp. 69-92.
- Bendixen, M., Bukasa, K. A. and Abratt, R. (2004), "Brand equity in the business-to-business market", *Industrial Marketing Management*, Vol. **33**, pp. 371-380.
- Berry, L. L. (1995), "Relationship Marketing of Services--Growing Interest, Emerging Perspectives", *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, Vol. **23**, no. 4, pp. 236-245.
- Berry, L. L. and Parasuraman, A. (1991), *Marketing Services - Competing Through Quality*, New York, NY: The Free Press.,
- Bitner, M.J. (1990), "Evaluating Service Encounters: The Effects of Physical Surroundings and Employee Responses", *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. **54**, no. 2, pp. 69-82.
- Blombäck, A. and Axelsson, B. (2006), "The role of corporate brand image in the selection of new subcontractors", *Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing*, Vol. **22**, no. 6, pp. 418-430.
- Bove, L. L. and Johnson, L. W. (2000), "A customer-service worker relationship model", *International Journal of Service Industry Management*, Vol. **11**, no. 5, pp. 491-510.
- Bove, L. L. and Johnson, L. W. (2006), "Customer loyalty to one service worker: Should it be discouraged?", *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, Vol. **23**, no. 1, pp. 79-91.
- Brito, C. and Roseira, C. (2007), "Towards a multi-dimensional approach to supply management: a comparative case study", *Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing*, Vol. **22**, no. 1, pp. 72-79.
- Brock Smith, J. and Barclay, D. W. (1997), "The Effects of Organizational Differences and Trust on the Effectiveness of Selling Partner Relationships", *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. **61**, no. 1, pp. 3-21
- Cahill, D. J. (1996), *Internal Marketing: Your Company's Next Stage of Growth*, New York, N.Y: The Haworth Press.

- Chang, H. (2006), "Integrating the role of sales agent into the branding model in the insurance industry", *Journal of American Academy of Business*, Vol. **8**, no. 2, pp. 278-285.
- Christopher, M., Payne, A. and Ballantyne, D. (1991), "Relationship Marketing: Bringing Quality, Customer Service and Marketing Together", Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann.
- Chun, R. and Davies, G. (2006), "The Influence of Corporate Character on Customers and Employees: Exploring Similarities and Differences", *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, Vol. **34**, no. 2, pp. 138-146.
- Crosby, L. A., Evans, K. R. and Cowles, D. (1990), "Relationship Quality in Services Selling: An Interpersonal Influence Perspective", *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. **54**, no. 3, pp. 68-81.
- Dale, K. (1995), "Manufacturing: A wide product range at a low cost", *Industrial Management and Data Systems*, Vol. **95**, no. 4, pp. 8-11.
- Davies, A., Brady, T. and Hobday, M. (2007), "Organizing for solutions: Systems seller vs. systems integrator", *Industrial Marketing Management*, Vol. **36**, no. 2, pp. 183-193.
- Davies, A., Brady, T. and Hobday, M. (2006), "Charting a path toward integrated solutions", *Sloan Management Review*, Vol. **47**, no. 3, Spring, pp. 39-48.
- Davies, A. and Hobday, M. (2005), *The Business of Projects: Managing Innovation in complex products and systems*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Davies, G., Chun, R., da Silva, Rui V. and Roper, S. (2004), "A Corporate Character Scale to Assess Employee and Customer Views of Organization Reputation", *Corporate Reputation Review*, Vol. **7**, no. 2, pp. 125-146.
- De Chernatony, L. 2001, *From Brand Vision to Brand Evaluation*, Oxford, UK: Butterworth-Heinemann.
- De Chernatony, L. (1999), "Brand management through narrowing the gap between brand identity and brand reputation", *Journal of Marketing Management*, Vol. **15**, no. 1-3, pp. 157-180.
- De Chernatony, L. and Segal-Horn, S. (2003), "The criteria for successful services brands", *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. **37**, no.7/8, pp. 1095-1118.
- Dion, P., Easterling, D. and Miller, S. J. (1995), "What Is Really Necessary in Successful Buyer/Seller Relationships?", *Industrial Marketing Management*, Vol. **24**, no. 1, pp. 1-9.
- Dobree, J. and Page, A. S. (1990), "Unleashing the Power of Service Brands in the 1990s", *Management Decision*, Vol. **28**, no. 6, pp. 14-28.
- Doney, P. M. and Cannon, J. P. (1997), "An examination of the nature of trust in buyer-seller relationships", *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. **61**, no. April, pp. 35-51.
- Ford, D. (1990), *Understanding Business Markets: Interaction, Relationships and Networks*, Cambridge: Academic Press.
- Ford, D., Gadde, L., Håkansson, H. and Snehota, I. (2003), *Managing Business Relationships*, London: Wiley and Sons.
- Foster, B. D. and Cadogan, J. W. (2000), "Relationship selling and customer loyalty: an empirical investigation", *Marketing Intelligence and Planning*, Vol. **18**, no. 4, pp. 185-199.
- Gadde, L. and Håkansson, H. (2001), *Supply network strategies*, New York, NY: Wiley.
- Galbraith, J. R. (2002), "Organizing to deliver solutions", *Organizational dynamics*, Vol. **31**, no. 2, pp. 194-207.
- Gordon, G. L., Calantone, R. J. and Di Benedetto, C. Anthony (1993), "Brand equity in the business-to-business sector: An exploratory study", *Journal of Product and Brand Management*, Vol. **2**, no. 3, pp. 4-16.
- Gossain, S. and Kandiah, G. (1998), "Reinventing Value: The New Business Ecosystem", *Strategy and Leadership*, Vol. **26**, no. 5, pp. 28-33.

- Gregory, A. (2007), "Involving Stakeholders in Developing Corporate Brands: the Communication Dimension", *Journal of Marketing Management*, Vol. **23**, no. 1, pp. 59-73.
- Grönroos, C. (2004), "The relationship marketing process: communication, interaction, dialogue, value", *Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing*, Vol. **19**, no. 2, pp. 99-113.
- Grönroos, C. (1990), "Relationship approach to marketing in service contexts: The marketing and organizational behaviour interface", *Journal of Business Research*, Vol. **20**, no. 1, pp. 3-11.
- Grönroos, C. (1983), "Seven key areas of research according to the Nordic School of Service Marketing". In: Berry, L., Shotack, G.L. and Upah, G.D., eds., *Emerging Perspectives on Services Marketing*, Chicago, IL: American Marketing Association, pp. 108-110.
- Grönroos, C. (1981), "Internal marketing – an integral part of marketing theory". In: Donnelly, J.H. and George, W.R., eds., *Marketing of Services*, Chicago, IL: American Marketing Association, pp. 236-238.
- Guenzi, P. and Pelloni, O. (2004), "The impact of interpersonal relationships on customer satisfaction and loyalty to the service provider", *International Journal of Service Industry Management*, Vol. **15**, no. 4, pp. 365-384.
- Guenzi, P. (2002), "Sales Force Activities and Customer Trust", *Journal of Marketing Management*, Vol. **18**, no. 7/8, pp. 749-778.
- Gummesson, E. (1987), "Using internal marketing to develop a new culture: The case of Ericsson quality", *Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing*, Vol. **2**, no. 3, pp. 23-28.
- Hague, P. N. and Jackson, P. (1994), *Power of Industrial Brands: An Effective Route to Competitive Advantage*, London: McGraw-Hill.
- Håkansson, H. and Snehota, I. (1995), *Developing relationships in business networks*, London: Routledge.
- Harris, F. and De Chernatony, L. (2001), "Corporate branding and corporate brand performance", *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. **35**, no. 3/4, pp. 441-456.
- Hatch, M. J. and Schultz, M. (2003), "Bringing the corporation into corporate branding", *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. **37**, no. 7/8, pp. 1041-1064.
- Hatch, M. J. and Schultz, M. (2001), "Are the strategic stars aligned for your corporate brand?", *Harvard Business Review*, Vol. **79**, no. 2, pp. 128-134.
- Helo, P. (2004), "Managing agility and productivity in the electronics industry", *Industrial Management and Data Systems*, Vol. **104**, no. 7, pp. 567-577.
- Hutton, J.G. (1997), "A study of brand equity in organizational-buying context", *Journal of Product and Brand Management*, Vol. **6**, no. 6, pp. 428-439.
- Ind, N. (1997), *The Corporate Brand*, London, Macmillan.
- Jap, S. D. (2000), "The strategic role of the salesforce in developing customer satisfaction across the relationship lifecycle", *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management*, Vol. **11**, no. 2, pp. 95-108.
- Johnson, J. T., Barksdale, H. C. and Boles, J. S. (2003), "Factors associated with customer willingness to refer leads to salespeople", *Journal of Business Research*, Vol. **56**, no. 4, pp. 257-263.
- Kauffmann, R. G. (1994), "Influences on industrial buyers' choice of products: Effects of product application, product type, and buying environment", *International Journal of Purchasing and Materials Management*, Vol. **30**, pp. 29-38.
- Kim, J., Reid, D., Plank, R. and Dahlstrom, R. (1998), "Examining the Role of Brand Equity in Business Markets: A Model, Research Propositions, and Managerial Implications", *Journal of Business-to-Business Marketing*, Vol. **5**, no. 3, pp. 65-89.
- Kirkup, M. H. and Anderson, C. D. (1987), "The role of the dealer in farmers' purchase decisions", *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. **21**, no. 9, pp. 21-31.

- Kotler, P. and Armstrong, G. (2005), *Principles of Marketing*, 11th edition, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education.
- Kumar, A. and Motwani, J. (1995), "A methodology for assessing time-based competitive advantage of manufacturing firms", *International Journal of Operations and Production Management*, Vol. **15**, no. 2, pp. 36-53.
- Langerak, F. (2001), "Effects of market orientation on the behaviors of salespersons and purchasers, channel relationships, and performance of manufacturers", *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, Vol. **18**, no. 3, pp. 221-234.
- Lehmann, D. R. and O'Shaughnessy, J. (1974), "Difference in Attribute Importance for Different Industrial Products", *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. **38**, no. 2, pp. 36-42.
- Levitt, T. (1965), *Industrial Purchasing Behavior: A Study of Communications Effects*, Harvard University, Boston, MA Division of Research, Graduate School of Business Administration,
- Liu, A.H. and Leach, M.P. (2001), "Developing Loyal Customers with a Value-adding Sales Force: Examining Customer Satisfaction and the Perceived Credibility of Consultative Salespeople", *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management*, Vol. **21**, no. 2, pp. 147-156.
- Lynch, J. and De Chernatony, L. (2004), "The power of emotion: Brand communication in business-to-business markets", *Journal of Brand Management*, Vol. **11**, no. 5, pp. 403-419.
- Lynch, J. and De Chernatony, L. (2007), "Winning Hearts and Minds: Business-to-Business Branding and the Role of the Salesperson", *Journal of Marketing Management*, Vol. **23**, no. 1/2, pp. 123-135.
- Macrae, C. (1999), "Brand reality editorial", *Journal of Marketing Management*, Vol. **15**, pp. 1-24.
- Martínez, E. and Pina, J.M. (2005), "Influence of Corporate Image on Brand Extensions: A Model Applied to the Service Sector", *Journal of Marketing Communications*, Vol. **11**, no. 4, pp. 263-281.
- Mattsson, L. (1985), "An application of a network approach to marketing: Defending and changing market positions". In: Dholakia, N. and Arndt, J., eds., *Changing the course of marketing: Alternative paradigms for widening marketing theory*, Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, pp. 263-288.
- Mavondo, F. T. and Rodrigo, E. M. (2001), "The effect of relationship dimensions on interpersonal and interorganizational commitment in organizations conducting business between Australia and China", *Journal of Business Research*, Vol. **52**, no. 2, pp. 111-121.
- Mayer, R. C., Davis, J. H. and Schoorman, F. D. (1995), "An Integrative Model of Organizational Trust", *The Academy of Management Review*, Vol. **20**, no. 3, pp. 709-734.
- McDonald, M. H. B., De Chernatony, L. and Harris, F. (2001), "Corporate marketing and service brands - Moving beyond the fast-moving consumer goods model", *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. **34**, no. 3/4, pp. 335-352.
- Michell, P., King, J. and Reast, J. (2001), "Brand values related to industrial products", *Industrial Marketing Management*, Vol. **30**, no. 5, pp. 415-425.
- Möller, K. E. and Laaksonen, M. (1986), "Situational dimensions and decision criteria in industrial buying: Theoretical and empirical analysis". In: Woodside, A., ed., *Advances in Business Marketing*, Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, pp. 163-207.
- Morgan, R. M. and Hunt, S. D. (1994), "The Commitment-Trust Theory of Relationship Marketing", *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. **58**, no. 3, pp. 20-38.
- Mudambi, S. M. (2002), "Branding importance in business-to-business markets: Three buyer clusters", *Industrial Marketing Management*, Vol. **31**, no. 6, pp. 525-533.
- Mudambi, S. M., Doyle, P. and Wong, V. (1997), "An exploration of branding in industrial markets", *Industrial Marketing Management*, Vol. **26**, no. 5, pp. 433-446.

- Noorul Haq, A. and Kannan, G. (2006), "Design of an integrated supplier selection and multi-echelon distribution inventory model in a built-to-order supply chain environment", *International Journal of Production Research*, Vol. **44**, no. 10, pp. 1963-1985.
- O'Shaughnessy, J. 1971, "Selling as an interpersonal influence process", *Journal of Retailing*, Vol. **47**, no. 4, pp. 32-46.
- Palmatier, R. W., Dant, R. P., Grewal, D. and Evans, K. R. (2006), "Factors influencing the effectiveness of relationship marketing: A meta-analysis", *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. **70**, no. 4, pp. 136-153.
- Pires, G. D. and Aisbett, J. (2003), "The relationship between technology adoption and strategy in business-to-business markets: The case of e-commerce", *Industrial Marketing Management*, Vol. **32**, no. 4, pp. 291-300.
- Pirkul, H. and Jayaraman, V. (1996), "Production, Transportation, and Distribution Planning in a Multi-Commodity Tri-Echelon System", *Transportation Science*, Vol. **30**, no. 4, pp. 291-302.
- Rackham, N. and DeVincentis, J. R. (1999), *Rethinking the Sales Force*, New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Reynolds, K. E. and Arnold, M. J. (2000), "Customer loyalty to the salesperson and the store: Examining relationship customers in an upscale retail context", *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management*, Vol. **20**, no. 2, pp. 89-98.
- Reynolds, M.P. and Beatty, S.E. (1999), "Customer benefit and company consequences of customer-salesperson relationships in retailing", *Journal of Retailing*, Vol. **75**, no. 1, pp. 11-322.
- Roper, S. and Davies, G. (2007), "The Corporate Brand: Dealing with Multiple Stakeholders", *Journal of Marketing Management*, Vol. **23**, no. 1/2, pp. 75-90.
- Sawhney, M. (2006), "Going Beyond the Product: Defining, Designing and Delivering Customer Solutions". In: Lusch, R.F. and Vargo, S., eds., *The Service-Dominant Logic of Marketing: Dialog, Debate, and Directions*, New York, NY: M.E. Sharpe, pp. 365-380.
- Seppänen, R., Blomqvist, K. and Sundqvist, S. (2007), "Measuring inter-organizational trust - a critical review of the empirical research in 1990-2003", *Industrial Marketing Management*, Vol. **36**, no. 2, pp. 249-265.
- Shaw, J., Giglierano, J. and Kallis, J. (1989), "Marketing complex technical products: The importance of intangible attributes", *Industrial Marketing Management*, Vol. **18**, no. 1, pp. 45-53.
- Shepherd, C. and Ahmed, P. K. (2000), "From product innovation to solutions innovation: a new paradigm for competitive advantage", *European Journal of Innovation Management*, Vol. **3**, no. 2, pp. 100-106.
- Slywotsky, A. J. (1996), *Value Migration: How to Think Several Moves Ahead of the Competition*, Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.
- Slywotzky, A. J. and Morrison, D.J. (1998), *The Profit Zone: How Strategic Business Design Will Lead You to Tomorrow's Profits*, Chichester: John Wiley and Sons.
- Spiro, R. L., Perreault Jr., W. D. and Reynolds, F. D. (1976), "The personal selling Pprocess: a critical review and model", *Industrial Marketing Management*, Vol. **5**, no. 5, pp. 351-364.
- Stafford, T. F. and Stafford, M. R. (2003), "Industrial buyers' perceptions of industrial salespersons", *Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing*, Vol. **18**, no. 1, pp. 40-58.
- Swan, J. E., Bowers, M. R. and Richardson, L. D. (1999), "Customer Trust in the Salesperson: An Integrative Review and Meta-Analysis of the Empirical Literature", *Journal of Business Research*, Vol. **44**, no. 2, pp. 93-107.
- Taylor, S. A., Celuch, K. and Goodwin, S. (2004), "The importance of brand equity to customer loyalty", *Journal of Product and Brand Management*, Vol. **13**, no. 4,

pp. 217-227.

- Tellefsen, T. and Thomas, G. P. (2005), "The antecedents and consequences of organizational and personal commitment in business service relationships", *Industrial Marketing Management*, Vol. **34**, no. 1, pp. 23-37.
- Thomas, D. J. and Griffin, P. M. (1996), "Coordinated supply chain management", *European Journal of Operational Research*, Vol. **94**, no. 1, pp. 1-15.
- Thompson, K. E., Knox, S. D. and Mitchell, H. G. (1998), "Business to business brand attributes in a changing purchasing environment", *Irish Marketing Review*, Vol. **10**, no. 3, pp. 25-32.
- Thorelli, H. B. (1986), "Networks: Between Markets and Hierarchies", *Strategic Management Journal*, Vol. **7**, no. 1, pp. 37-51.
- Tuli, K.R., Kohli, A. K. and Bharadwaj, S. G. (2007), "Rethinking Customer Solutions: From Product Bundles to Relational Processes", *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. **71**, no. 3, pp. 1-17.
- Urde, M. (1999), "Brand orientation: a mindset for building brands into strategic resources", *Journal of Marketing Management*, Vol. **15**, pp. 117-133.
- Vallaster, C. and De Chernatony, L. (2006), "Internal brand building and structuration: the role of leadership", *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. **40**, no. 7/8, pp. 761-784.
- van Riel, Allard C. R., Pahud de Mortanges, Charles and Streukens, S. (2005), "Marketing antecedents of industrial brand equity: An empirical investigation in specialty chemicals", *Industrial Marketing Management*, Vol. **34**, pp. 841-847.
- Vonderembse, M. A., Uppal, M., Huang, S. H. and Dismukes, J. P. (2006), "Designing supply chains: Towards theory development", *International Journal of Production Economics*, Vol. **100**, no. 2, pp. 223-238.
- Wilson, D. T. and Ghingold, M. (1981), "Similarity-Dissimilarity: A Re-examination". In: Reingen, P.H. and Woodside, A.G., eds., *Buyer-Seller Interactions: Empirical Research and Normative Issues*, Chicago, IL: American Marketing Association, pp. 88-99.
- Wilson, A. M. (2001), "Understanding organisational culture and the implications for corporate marketing", *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. **35**, no. 3/4, pp. 353-367.
- Wise, R. and Baumgartner, P. (1999), "Go Downstream: The New Profit Imperative in Manufacturing", *Harvard Business Review*, Vol. **77**, no. 5, pp. 133-141.
- Yau, O. H. M., McFetridge, P. R., Chow, R. P. M., Lee, J. S. Y., Sin, L. Y. M. and Tse, A. C. B. (2000), "Is relationship marketing for everyone?", *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. **34**, no. 9/10, pp. 1111-1127.

About the authors and correspondence

Jaakko Aspara is Professor (acting) of Sales Management at the Department of Marketing and Management, Helsinki School of Economics HSE. His research interests include corporate-level strategic marketing and branding, strategic sales management, marketing-finance interface, and new offering development.

Corresponding Author: Jaakko Aspara, D.Sc. (Econ. and Bus. Adm.), Professor (acting), Helsinki School of Economics, Department of Marketing and Management, P. O. Box 1210, FI-00101 Helsinki, Finland.

T +358 50 5468 891

F +358 9 4313 8660

E jaakko.aspara@hse.fi

Henrikki Tikkanen is Professor of Marketing and Head of Department at the Department of Marketing and Management, Helsinki School of Economics HSE. His research interests include corporate-level strategic marketing, customer relationship management, business networks, international business strategies, and project marketing.

Henrikki Tikkanen, D.Sc. (Econ. and Bus. Adm.) Professor, Helsinki School of Economics, Department of Marketing and Management, P. O. Box 1210, FI-00101 Helsinki, Finland.