

# 2

## Branding and Related Research Fields

**Abstract** Marketing has gone through a shift from a product focus to the consumer focus of market orientation and branding. Successful brands create value both for the producer and for the consumer and are traded at a premium. Branding is in its essence a strategic issue, and the areas of branding that are explored further in the chapter are service branding and general commodity branding. There are several examples provided on how generic commodities have been successfully branded by adding distinctive features or benefits. It can be difficult to differentiate an invisible commodity such as electricity by adding distinctive features. By adopting a relationship aspect and looking at differentiation through service it can be stated that electricity can be differentiated and therefore branded.

**Keywords** Commodity branding · Service branding  
Customer relationship · Differentiation · Market orientation

Marketing has gone through major paradigm shifts from the beginning of last century. The emphasis has changed from a pure product focus (product orientation), assuming that customers will buy whatever

product available, to an increased focus on the customer (market orientation) (Kotler and Keller 2005). Furthermore, in the past few years a relationships aspect has weightily influenced the branding literature. While relationships have been a part of marketing for a long time, they did not find their way into branding until the 1990s and twenty-first century at which time branding was likewise included in relationship, then framed *relational branding* (Brodie et al. 2002).

Branding, in its simplest sense, is an identification denoting the ownership of a particular company (Barwise et al. 2000), which is how branding was treated before. Today, brands are built with a particular consumer type in mind, since the consumption of brands by particular consumer types defines who they are, wish to be and/or wish to be seen as (Elliott and Wattanasuwan 1998; Kay 1995; Simoes and Dibb 2001).

## Why Branding

Organizations, which have been successful in branding, have been able to charge higher prices and increase customer demand. Furthermore, they have been able to extend their brands more easily, communicate more efficiently, obtain larger margins, and insulate their companies better from competition (Aaker 1996; Anderson and Narus 2004; Hague and Jackson 1997; Keller 2008; Quelch and Harding 1996). Brands are, furthermore, symbols which customers have learned to trust, often signaling intangible product qualities (Erdem and Swait 1998). As can be seen from this, research suggests that branding has value for both the manufacturer and the consumer. Thus, it makes sense for a supplier to invest in creating a strong recognition and preference for his brand (Armstrong et al. 2005).

## The Merits of Brands

Brands have advantages both for companies and for their customers. Brands are also advantageous for manufacturers since a successful branding strategy should contribute to the establishment of a powerful

bargaining position with retailers and distributors, due to better market acceptance, assurance of quality, higher profit margins, and the benefits associated with the manufacturer's marketing efforts (Lazer and Culley 1983). A brand should suggest a product's value, facilitate trade, and promote efficiency. In a way, it insulates the brand from competition (Park et al. 1986). If managed correctly, a brand adds dimensions to a product or service and differentiates it from competitors in the same field that satisfies an identical need (Kotler and Keller 2005). One of the main asserted benefits of branding for the manufacturer is its ability to build purchase confidence and improve customer loyalty (Aaker 1991). Furthermore, brands are an effective and compelling means to communicate the benefits and value a product or service can provide (Morrison 2001). Organizations which have been successful in branding have been able to charge a higher price for their products and increase customer demand. Furthermore, they have been able to extend their brands more easily, communicate more efficiently, obtain larger margins, and insulate their companies better from competition (e.g., Aaker 1996; Grönroos 2007; Hague and Jackson 1997; Keller 2008; Quelch and Harding 1996; Wood 2000).

## Why Companies Should Brand

Name recognition has been one of the most cited features of successful firms (Aaker 1989), especially where repurchase decisions rely heavily on the customer's previous experiences (Levitt 1980); the inherent strengths of brands are expressed through the leverage of their name, symbol, or logo, that is, those parts that can be vocalized or communicated (Kotler 1998). In contrast to fixed assets, invisible assets such as corporate reputation or knowledge flows appear to enhance value and tend to be harder to copy (Grant 1991). The company and its corporate and product brands also may be regarded as "sources" that can help to substantiate the credibility of the corporate image (Dowling 1986), the firm's commitment to customers (Light 1997), and provide strong brand signals to secure the introduction of brand extensions (Aaker 1991; Erdem and Swait 1998).

## Why Consumers Prefer Brands

But brands are not solely for sellers. As far as the consumers are concerned, for example, the brand has the ability to simplify their decision making and reduce risk, especially as the consumer's life becomes more complicated, rushed, and time-starved (Jacob et al. 1971). To customers, brands are symbols that they have learned to trust, often signaling intangible product qualities (Erdem and Swait 1998), and thus can be considered as a guarantee of quality, origin, and performance, thereby increasing perceived value to the customer and reducing the risk and complexity involved in the buying decision (Blackett 1998). Brands are built with a particular consumer type in mind, since the consumption of brands defines who the consumer is, wishes to be and/or wishes to be seen as (Elliott and Wattanasuwan 1998; Kay 1995; Simoes and Dibb 2001). Some argue that customers in our postmodern consumer culture realize that brands are vital in the construction of their individual identities (Simoes and Dibb 2001). Brands can represent value for consumers by assigning legal responsibility and reducing perceived risk by signaling the quality of the product (Janiszewski and van Osselaer 2000). Many types of perceived risk have been identified, including functional, financial, physical, psychological, and social risks (Janiszewski and van Osselaer 2000). Furthermore, consumers may perceive a risk of being landed with a product that is of lower quality (Erdem and Swait 1998) and brands appear to reduce consumers' search costs (Biswas 1992). Consumers incur costs when gathering and processing information to reduce uncertainty and perceived risk (Shugan 1980). Information-gathering costs include expenditure of time, money, psychological costs, etc. Similarly, information-processing costs (e.g., thinking costs) include time and psychological costs (Erdem and Swait 1998).

## The Brand and the Individual

Brands can lend a symbolic meaning to products, adding onto their functional benefits (Janiszewski and van Osselaer 2000). The symbolic meaning can be used as a medium to construct a social identity for the consumer (Holt 2003) whereby the symbolic meaning is utilized to

delineate and communicate traits of the individual's self-concept and, subsequently, consumers are able to develop an affiliation with the brand to the point of identification (Lin 2010). Likewise, trust between consumer and company can be enhanced by a strong brand and may offer a link which can be used to develop a relationship. Furthermore, a strong brand enables companies to charge a premium price (Ailawadi et al. 2003) and develop new products in the form of brand extensions (Desai and Keller 2002; Gurhan-Canli and Maheswaran 1998; Zhang and Sood 2002).

## What Branding is About

When operating within a competitive market, it is a valid question why a buyer decides on a particular offer in a situation where there are similar or even identical choices. Companies can affect the choices by employing the various marketing tools they have at their disposal. One of those tools is branding (Kotler and Keller 2005). Branding has long been recognized as an integral part of the contemporary business environment (e.g., Aaker and Shansby 1982; Ambler et al. 2002; Doyle 1990; Gardner and Levy 1955; Grönroos 2007; Homer 2008; Keller 1993).

## Definitions of Brands and Branding

A brand is the sum of perceptions and feelings held by consumers on a product/service recognized by a brand name. This includes factors such as distinctiveness (e.g., its packaging and logos), quality, performance, familiarity, and user imagery (e.g., Batra et al. 2012). Essentially, brands should influence consumers and generate positive and attractive images that sell (Rindell et al. 2013). The American Marketing Association (n.d.) defines a brand as “a name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers. The legal term for brand is trademark. A brand may identify one item, a family of items, or all items of that seller. [...]” (American Marketing Association).

## Furthering the Concept

Various academic assessments sustain the AMA definition (e.g., Erdem and Swait 1998; Keller 1993) but the definition has been critiqued, mainly for its narrow scope. Wider perspectives call for viewing a brand beyond merely functioning as an entity (see Berry (2000), Dall’Olmo Riley and de Chernatony (2000) and Davis et al. (2000)), for knowledge on the purpose of brand in a broader service setting to include functioning as a process (Stern 2006) built on relationships (e.g., Fournier 1998) and other factors such as brand involvements, consumer consumption habits, culture (e.g., Arnould and Thompson 2005; Carù and Cova 2003; Schroeder and Salzer-Mörling 2006), and co-created brand experiences (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004). Furthermore, other prominent scholars have critiqued AMA’s definition. Grönroos (2007), for example, states that the AMA definition overlooks the importance of the service process in its scope, thereby excluding customers and their relationship to the company, since in this sense brands are perceived as relationships. He states that because services are perceived as processes in which the customer participates, the service process creates a distinction from one brand to another. For that reason, service should be part of the AMA definition in much the same way as applies to a name, term, sign, symbol, or other features of a brand. Grönroos further states that in some instances, as in the case of some physical good where the consumer does not get involved in the production process, the service element is minimal, e.g., soft drinks and cereals, but for products that are more service oriented, “the situation changes and the importance and involvement of the customer increases dramatically” (Grönroos 2007, p. 330).

Kotler’s (1991) definition of brand is comparable to the one from AMA. He defines a brand as a “name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or combination of them which is intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors” (Kotler 1991). Those definitions are, furthermore, similar to Doyle’s (1990) definition of a brand. Doyle defined

a successful brand as a “name, symbol, design, or some combination, which identifies the ‘product’ of a particular organization as having a sustainable differential advantage.”

## More Than a Name and a Logo

Brands can be explained as intangible assets based on audiences’ perception (e.g., Aaker and Joachimsthaler 2000a; Batra et al. 2012; de Chernatony and McDonald 1998; Grace and O’Cass 2002; Nilson 1998; Riezebos 2003). Current literature generally does not solely concentrate on apparent “elements” such as name, logotype, slogan, color, design, or symbol. Instead, the focus is on the sum of ideas and associations these elements evoke among audiences—the brand’s image (e.g., de Chernatony and McDonald 1998; Grace and O’Cass 2002; Duncan 2002; Nilson 1998; Riezebos 2003; Simoes and Dibb 2001).

The consumers must be taught whom the product is for, what it does, and why they should care (Kotler and Keller 2005) by providing a mental structure to help them classify the product in their minds. Thus, it involves more than simply selecting and promoting a catchy name or symbol. Ballantyne and Aitken (2007) take a constructivist view on brands and suggest that connotations enclosed in a brand are embedded in the minds of consumers and other stakeholders, thus propositioning that brand value is confirmed or disconfirmed by use through customer contact points over time.

## Brand Is Perception

It is important to note that a brand name is more than the label employed to differentiate among various manufacturers of a product. The brand name is a complex symbol that represents a variety of ideas and attributes. It tells the consumers many things, not only by the way it sounds but, more important, via the body of associations it has built up and acquired as a public object over a period of time (Gardner and

Levy 1955). Furthermore, Kapferer (1992) argues that branding means more than just giving a brand name to a product or products, as brands are a direct result of strategic factors, segmentation and product differentiation. Brands are defined by an audience's perceptions, and created and maintained through the communication surrounding the entity in question. Moreover, communicating through brands can represent a wide variety of things, including people. Thus, brands are, by definition, not limited to a certain market or type of products (Blombäck and Axelsson 2007).

## What Branding Is Not

Despite the definitions and discussion on branding and related concepts offered above, a brand can still be regarded as an intangible concept. To further clarify what a brand is, it is helpful to look at what researchers have said branding is not. Branding is not supposed to send false messages, since branding is quite often misunderstood or even disregarded as creating the illusion that a product or service is better than it really is (Hague and Jackson 1997). Moreover, branding is not about stirring people into irrational buying decisions, and it is not only the job of the marketing department (Kotler and Pfoertsch 2007).

## Brand Image

Brand image can be considered a new variety of “old” psychological variables that aim to explain consumer behavior (Hsieh et al. 2004). Brand image is an extrinsic attribute related to the product, but it is not physically a part of it (Fandos and Flavián 2006) and affects consumers' personal judgment about the brand's overall excellence or superiority (Yoo et al. 2000). Through brand image, consumers are able to recognize a product, evaluate its quality, lower purchase risks, and obtain a certain experience and satisfaction out of product differentiation (Lin and Lin 2007).



## Evolution of the Concept

Since the middle of the nineteenth hundreds, the importance of branding image as a source of revenue has been acknowledged (Martineau 1958). The seminal article by Gardner and Levy (1955) theorized that products have complex associations, characteristics, and personalities that are more important for the overall status and sales of the brand than many of their technical attributes. By the early 1970s, brand image was defined as “an attitude about a given brand” (Bird et al. 1970). Gensch (1978) linked brand image with brand preference by asserting that brand preference is a function of the perception space associated with other brands. The 1980s saw attitude-based image (cognitive and psychological paths) research, dominated image research, and the linking of psychological concepts to strategic research in brand management (Zinkhan and Hirschheim 1992). Researchers have continued on this path into the 1990s, and brand image is considered the key component of brand equity (Aaker 1991; Keller 1993). By 1997, Jennifer Aaker’s article on brand personality laid the ground for personality research. More recent in time, Holt (2004) has written about iconic brands such as Nike, Apple, and Harley-Davidson, which create and tie to cultural myths that allow people to consume the myth and the image, and Cretu and Brodie (2007) state that brand image is a set of perceptions about a brand reflected by the associations the consumers has for a brand. In the past few years, image has rather come to be viewed as a process than as an object (Stern 2006)—a stance recent research has adopted and encourages others to take (e.g., Ballantyne and Aitken 2007; Merz et al. 2009). This notion is based on a dynamic and interactive view of image, entangling past and present as each consumer understands and stores it in his memory (Keller 2008; Rindell 2013; Solms and Turnbull 2002).

## Definition Of a Brand Image

The definitions and operationalization of brand image have been fairly irregular, although they are not without some patterns and commonalities. In their summary of the definitions and conceptualizations of

brand image from 28 studies on the history of marketing literature, Dobni and Zinkhan (1990) provide a centralized collection of definitions based on authors' principle emphasis. They define brand image as the reasoned or emotional perceptions consumers attach to specific brands. Furthermore, Dobni and Zinkhan (1990) have laid out the essential structures of brand image: Brand image is the concept of a brand that is held by the consumer. Brand image is largely a subjective and perceptual phenomenon that is formed through consumer interpretation, whether reasoned or emotional.

Brand image is not inherent in the technical, functional, or physical concerns of the product. Rather, it is affected and molded by marketing activities, by context variables, and by the characteristics of the perceiver. Where brand image is concerned, the perception of reality is more important than the reality itself.

## Dimensions and Measurements of Image

Brand image is such a multidimensional concept that authors have no consensus on how to empirically measure it (Hsieh 2002; Martinez and de Chernatony 2004; Randheer et al. 2012; Stern et al. 2001), and the past generation has witnessed the use of multiple tools, routines, and methods to examine content and organization (Stern et al. 2001). For example, Randheer (2012) attempted to formalize brand image structure with three dimensions via value, quality, and awareness and concluded that those dimensions are connected and can impact the image of the brand but are not complete sets in themselves. Among the reasons for multiple and often incommensurable methodological techniques are wide variations in the conceptualization of components to be measured; paradigmatic differences about the value of specific types of data; and controversy about the manner in which data are collected, classified, coded, analyzed, and represented (Stern et al. 2001). Thus, different authors use different approaches to measure brand image. Keller (1993) measures brand image by brand associations related to the product, favorability of brand associations, strength of brand associations, and uniqueness of brand associations. Within the theme brand

equity, Lasser et al. (1995) developed a scale for measuring consumer-based brand equity, in which they refer to it as a social image. Aaker (1996), on the other hand, proposes that brand image be assessed through association/differentiation measures regarding value, brand personality, organizational associations, and differentiation.

## Brand Associations

Following cognitive and psychological principles and in line with definitions by Herzog (1963) and Newman (1957), Keller (1993) defines brand image in terms of perceptions about a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in the consumer's memory. These associations refer to any aspects that link the brand with the consumer's memory (Aaker 1996).

Keller (1993) classifies brand associations into three major categories with respect to their level of abstraction (i.e., attribute, benefit, and overall brand attitude). Within the theme of brand equity, Aaker (1996) proposes that brand image should be assessed through association/differentiation measures regarding value, brand personality, organizational associations, and differentiation.

## A Changed Viewpoint of Image

While reading this chapter, the reader might gain the impression that image is one of many dimensions of the structure of a brand. That is fundamentally how the literature has largely been handling image from the 1970s, e.g., an earlier quote from Bird et al. (1970) where image is said to be an attitude “about” a brand, thus separating those two concepts. That is, in fact, how the discourse on image and branding has been presented in the literature, whereby companies are presumed to have substantial influence over how brands are perceived by their customers as long as the companies are consistent in their branding activities (e.g., Aaker et al. 2004; Alessandri 2001; Keller 2008; Kotler and Keller 2005). However, brand image is “in the eye of the beholder”

(Stern et al. 2001) and in newer literature streams the concept of brand and image has merged, i.e., “the brand as a concept is always an image” (Grönroos 2007, p. 331).

## Image and Relationship

Grönroos has also argued that relationships should be an integral part of branding (Grönroos 1991, 2007) and consequently image by referring to his logic above. The importance of relationships thus influences the service branding literature (for more discussion see in this chapter). Relationships occur overtly among people (Gummesson 2002) but in the case of brands, those are referred to as parasocial relationships. The significance of relationships is recognized within branding, and to some, a brand is fundamentally a relationship which contains emotional connections and loyalty (Kapferer 2008). Relationships may include objects, symbols, and other inconsequential occurrences that are given increased attention. This includes preexisting associations with customers which may be impersonal but are still of value as they affect the image of a company. Those might include the name of the company and its brand, famed personalities associated with the company or other people that denote the attitudes of the company (Hampf and Lindberg-Repo 2011).

Strandvik and Rindell (2010) point out that image has attracted limited attention within the service literature. The conventional branding literature adopts the view that the company can have a substantial impact on how image is perceived by their customers and other stakeholders as long as the company is consistent in communicating their marketing messages (e.g., Aaker et al. 2004; Alessandri 2001; Keller 2008). However, Keller (1993, 2008, p. 86) recognizes that perceptions are echoed “by the brand associations held in the consumer’s memory” which challenges the conventional definition in the sense that individual differences reflect the “reality” of how image is perceived (Brown et al. 2006, p. 105) depending on linkages to the brand in the consumer’s memory (Aaker 1996).

## Brand Heritage

Heritage is not a new term within the branding literature. It was first used by Aaker (1996) who used brand heritage to include an organization's heritage, history, and reputation. Although Aaker did not define the concept in detail, the term has drawn research interest (e.g., Urde et al. 2007; Wuestefeld et al. 2012). Urde (2007) concludes that a heritage brand's positioning/value propositions are founded on its legacy which may range over extended time and are reinforced by customer-based beliefs. Furthermore, brand heritage may profit from nostalgia that can be used to remind consumers of the "good old times" (Brown et al. 2003; Keller and Lehmann 2006). However, companies' branding activities are merely one possible source from which images develop as they are also based on abundant other stimuli over time, (Strandvik and Rindell 2010), where they have originated from, been influenced by, and developed by means of previous management actions (Braun-LaTour et al. 2007; Brown et al. 2006; Rindell 2007).

Taking a physical product or intangible service and developing it into a brand includes a multitude of marketing functions, most of which are aimed at making the consumers perceive that the brand is different. The difference, however, resides in the minds of the consumers and their involvements and acquired knowledge gained over time in their various experiences of the brand (Keller and Lehmann 2009). When focusing specifically on the branding of electricity, it is helpful to keep this in mind, as in this case brands cannot simply be "built" since there are multitudes of external non-controllable images associated with the recent liberalization of the electricity sector which must not be overlooked.

## Differentiation

Kohli and Thakor (1997) claim that the only solid differentiation is based on brand image. Differentiation makes other brands an imperfect substitute so buyers of the brand are more loyal, and therefore its customer base is more secure (Romaniuk et al. 2007). This makes the

brand less susceptible to the activity of competitor brands; when a competitor lowers his price, brands that are more differentiated are thought to lose fewer customers (Caves and Williamson 1985).

There are various types of differentiation in the body of literature, which include (1) product differentiation, (2) service differentiation, and finally (3) perceived differentiation. There are several definitions of product differentiation. In an economist's perspective, Smith (1956) said that product differentiation is concerned with the bending of demand to the will of supply. Dickson (1997) defines product differentiation as the act of distinguishing a product from its competitors on one or more basic performance or image features. Watkins (1986) is convinced that the epitome of product differentiation is branding and that the firm's strategy is to make its products different from its competitors in such a way that customers believe they are superior. Elsewhere, Davies et al. (2003) argue that in a service organization, the nature of a service makes it more difficult to achieve differentiation. One method to achieve differentiation, without necessarily developing a real difference in the product or service offered, is creating an image for being different (Grönroos 1988), and the most common way of doing so is by branding.

The problem with analyzing product differentiation in terms of measurable performance attributes is that it does not delve very far into customers' underlying motivations (Porter 1985). In the marketing literature, perceived differentiation takes a motivational perspective. A meaningful perceived difference should provide buyers with their reason to purchase and be loyal to the brand (Aaker 2001; Kotler 1994). Any undifferentiated new entrant is most likely to fail because no customers are motivated to patronage its products/services (Davidson 1976). Established brands are exhorted to maintain their point of difference in order to stay desirable to their customers (Romaniuk et al. 2007). The marketing literature explicitly emphasizes that the positioning has to be perceived by customers as different (Ries and Trout 1986) and must be valued (Carpenter et al. 1994; Kotler 1994; Reeves 1984). This valued difference does not have to be a material product feature. Rather, it may be symbolic, emotional, or even quite trivial (Broniarczyk and Gershoff 2003). The importance of proper positioning associated with differentiation cannot be overstated. Positioning has been examined

from a strategic angle (Hooley et al. 1998; Park et al. 1986; Ries and Trout 1986) and an analytical angle (Carroll and Green 1997; Hair et al. 1998). Positioning is a part of promoting the identity of the brand and its value proposition to the targeted consumer (Aaker and Joachimsthaler 2000b). It can, therefore, be said that brand positioning is deep seeded in the marketing function of companies. It is based on the interaction of the company's marketing tools and plays a pivotal role in marketing communications due to its importance in influencing unique consumer perceptions.

## Defining Differentiation

A firm differentiates itself from its competitors “when it provides something unique that is valuable to buyers beyond simply offering a low price” (Porter 1985). Differentiation is concerned with how a firm competes—the ways in which it can offer uniqueness to customers. Such uniqueness might relate to consistency (McDonald's), reliability (Federal Express), status (American Express), quality (BMW), and innovation (Sony). Differentiation is said to be brought about by brand heterogeneity, with brands being made of distinctive bundles of attributes. It is also necessary that in a heterogeneous market where customers vary in their preferences, the benefits derived from different attributes bundled should vary as well (Sharp and Dawes 2001).

A differentiation advantage occurs when a firm is able to obtain from its differentiation a price premium on the market that exceeds the cost of providing the differentiation. Every firm has opportunities for differentiating its offerings to customers, although the range of differentiation opportunities depends on the product/service attributes (Romaniuk et al. 2007).

In marketing perspective, differentiation is the act of designing a set of meaningful differences to distinguish the company's offer from competitors' offers (Armstrong et al. 2005). Differentiation exists when a firm's offering is preferred, on some buying occasions (or by some customers all of the time), over rival firms' offerings (Sharp and Dawes 2001). Identifying and communicating a point of difference is

considered essential. This point of difference be it functional or emotional, must be “meaningful” in that it provides buyers with a reason to purchase the brand (Aaker 1996).

In the service industry, Grönroos (1988, 1990) presents a service quality model and establishes a distinction between two forms of quality: technical quality and functional quality. Technical quality is described as what the customer gets as a consequence of interaction with the service organization. It involves the technical dimensions of the service delivery system such as equipment, computer-based systems, and the characteristics of the physical environment where the service is produced and consumed. On the other hand, functional quality corresponds to the manner in which the service is provided. It is associated with such features as access to service and to the appearance and behavior of the contact personnel. Grönroos (1988) further argues that it is difficult to achieve lasting competitive advantage through technical quality alone because competitors can introduce a similar solution quickly. This is also supported by Ferguson et al. (1999) who claim that technical quality is not sufficient unless the service offering in question is highly standardized and there is an absence of human interaction (e.g., automatic banking machines). Therefore, in principle, developing the functional quality dimension may add substantial value for customers and thus create the necessary competitive edge. Davies et al. (2003) define perceived differentiation as a “stakeholders’ perception of the distinctiveness of an organization.”

## Streams of Branding

Branding can be divided into several subcategories, namely commodity, industrial, corporate, product consumer, and service branding. Furthermore, branding is related to the customer equity concept as one of its three foundations. The other two are value and relationship equity. Lastly, branding and strategy are integrally related. Business decisions are not made in a vacuum and branding decisions are not an exception. When managers decide to adopt a branding strategy, they are also making a strategic decision on how to run their companies, as the strategy



will determine the general direction of companies, how companies interact with customers and their employees (Harris and de Chernatony 2001). As such, branding applies to all sectors, including the electricity sector. It forces management to ask themselves what their product (i.e., their brand) stands for its quality, price, service, innovation, and how these qualities can be best maintained, improved, and communicated. This should not be overlooked when decisions are made on whether a branding strategy should be used or not.

## Consumer Branding and Industrial Branding

Most of the branding literature available today comes from consumer branding. The general branding discussion in this book is all based on branding to consumers as the empirical research done for this book only covers households. Although industrial branding is not the focus here, it is beneficial to draw attention to this form of branding at some length in the chapter, since most customers of energy companies are both individuals and industrial buyers (Wiedmann 2004). For this reason, industrial branding cannot be overlooked when researching the branding efforts of companies within the electricity sector, because a larger proportion of the production is sold to industry (Þorsteinsson et al. 2007). In Iceland, for example, only 5% of electricity is sold to individual consumers and the rest to industry.

## Branding Industrial Products

Although research in industrial branding is limited, interest in the field has been increasing for the past 20 years (e.g., Bendixen et al. 2004; Gordon et al. 1993; Hutton and James 1997; Low and Blois 2002; Michell et al. 2001; Mudambi et al. 1997; Saunders and Watt 1979; Shipley and Howard 1993; Sinclair and Seward 1988). Few attempts have been made, however, by industrial branding researchers to offer a formal definition of what an industrial brand is, as only one formal definition could be found. Wards and Goldstine (1999, p. 348) defined an

industrial brand as a “distinctive identity that differentiates a relevant, enduring, and credible promise of value associated with a product, service, or organization and indicates the source of that promise [...]”

Research has shown that a good branding strategy is important in industrial markets (i.e., Blombäck and Axelsson 2007; Hutton and James 1997; Mudambi 2002; Mudambi et al. 1997). Strong industrial brands can increase information efficiency, reduce risk (Kotler and Pfoertsch 2007), and may command a price premium, although price and delivery are more important factors than brand in explaining industrial purchase decisions (Bendixen et al. 2004). Branding industrial products can be considered a multidimensional construct where other factors, more relevant to businesses, come to play, such as logistics, customer support, and corporate image, all of which contribute to product image (Håkansson and Waluszewski 2005). Therefore, industrial branding must entail not only the product but also the support structure. The support structure is more important in a B2B market than a B2C market since B2B companies are investing in a relationship as much as they invest in a product; this involves after sales support, access to informed personnel, timely and reliable delivery, and prompt feedback to questions (McQuiston 2004). Industrial branding also differs from consumer branding in that it involves more than merely how the consumer views the physical product or the psychological connections he or she has to it (McQuiston 2004). Furthermore, branding influences industrial buying behavior differently than consumer buying behavior. Organizational buyers can be regarded as more professional (Morris et al. 2001) and more rational in their approach; the procedure leading to the buying process is different (Shipley and Howard 1993), and frequently there are buying centers within organizations which are responsible for purchases (Hutton and James 1997). Lastly, organizational buying behavior differs from that of consumers in the perception of what is important, the decision processes followed and purchases made (Mudambi 2002). The buying process of businesses is characterized by careful evaluations of available alternatives, leaving little room for emotional impact and impulse purchases (de Chernatony and McDonald 1998; Malaval 2001; Solomon 2002).

## Differentiating an Industrial Product

For reasons mentioned above, the decisions companies face in designing a brand approach for their organizations vary somewhat, depending on whether their customers are individuals or industries. Nonetheless, firms develop brands for similar reasons, irrespective of the nature of their customers, that is to differentiate their products from those of their competitors (Aaker and Joachimsthaler 2000b; Kotler and Keller 2005; Ries and Ries 2002) and to attempt to gain a sustainable differential advantage for their products (Doyle 1990). What the differentiation is based on, however, varies and in the context of the electricity industry, it would appear that price is the only differentiation factor companies use in their marketing efforts of electricity (Walsh et al. 2005). From a branding perspective, differentiation based on price is ineffective since price is easy for competitors to imitate (Kotler and Keller 2005; Pesce 2002) as long as they have a similar or lower cost base.

Industrial markets both differ from consumer markets and share some commonalities. Despite claims that industrial markets have a limited need for brands since these are specialty markets where customers know a great deal about market offerings from a particular supplier, as well as their competitors' offerings (Kotler and Pfoertsch 2007), there is, nevertheless, significant evidence that brands can be of use in industrial markets, in which case brand image is also relevant to those markets.

## Product Branding and Corporate Branding

A firm using a product brand strategy rather than a corporate brand strategy will be able to better protect its corporate image from damage if one of its individual brands fails (Harris and de Chernatony 2001). A product brand strategy is also more flexible, allowing firms to appeal to different segments in different markets. However, it is more expensive to pursue a product branding strategy since it can result in higher marketing costs and lower brand profitability (Xie and Boggs 2006).

## Branding a Corporate Image

The corporate brand can be seen as just one part of the identity system of an organization according to Balmer and Greyser (2009). The corporate brand is characterized as the covenanted identity, that is, what the brand stands for, or the promise (Balmer and Greyser 2009). Firms opting for corporate brands use the brand to represent the firm, and the brand image is potentially constructed by everything a firm is perceived to be doing (Balmer 2001; Balmer and Gray 2003). Thus, corporate brand image is synonymous with the company's corporate image (Blombäck and Axelsson 2007), and the corporate brand offers managers a comprehensive discipline for clarifying, organizing, and communicating how the company creates value for itself and its customers (Bendixen et al. 2004). Additionally, corporate branding places more emphasis on factors internal to the firm, specifically on greater attention to the role of employees in building brands (Harris and de Chernatony 2001). As such, it requires a different management approach.

Electricity has been differentiated on features such as “night electricity” and “day electricity.” Those, however, cannot be considered actual branding practices, but rather various product offerings. The exception to the lack of differentiation is electricity made from green sources as those are differentiated through its production process. Various examples could, however, be found where electricity providers attempted to differentiate their company on environmentally sound principles of producing electricity. Basing branding on green attributes is, in fact, the most commonly and widely used way to brand electricity.

## Service Branding

The importance of service is ever increasing. The idea is prevalent, among managers and academics alike, that first-class service increases customer satisfaction (Parasuraman et al. 1985; Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004) and hence encourages consumer loyalty and

retention (Heskett et al. 2008; Reichheld and Sasser 1990; Rust et al. 2004; Rust et al. 1995; Seiders et al. 2005). When broadly defined, the term “service” can be said to consist of either goods or services but also any combinations of those in addition to other elements (Grönroos 2007). The growing awareness of the importance of service has found its way into the branding literature (e.g., Berry 2000; de Chernatony and Riley 1999; de Chernatony and Segal-Horn 2001; Turley and Moore 1995) where it is understood that a value proposition can lead to creation of customer experiences and value-in-use (Ballantyne and Aitken 2007; Berry 2000; de Chernatony and Segal-Horn 2003). Viewed this way, a brand’s purpose can be extended to both an entity and a process. This differs from branding being viewed largely to be about creating brand image or brand identity and the impact of those on consumer behavior (Brodie 2009). This standpoint of branding has been termed a service brand (e.g., de Chernatony 2006; Kasper et al. 2006). Not only does the term refer to branding of services per se but also applies to the service-centered dominant logic philosophy that “all marketing offerings, including those that involve tangible output (goods) and the process of service provision” (Vargo et al. 2004, p. 2) can be branded. Services differ from products in that they are intangible, heterogeneous, and co-produced with the customer (Anderson et al. 1997; de Chernatony and Segal-Horn 2001; Lusch et al. 2007). A service brand then needs to take this into account, as consumers are an integral part of the brand.

## Electricity as a Service

The process of branding electricity could, therefore, be defined from a service perspective as electricity has many characteristics similar to those of a service, due to its intangible nature. For instance, electricity is intangible, it cannot be easily displayed or stored, and electricity must be consumed [more or less] simultaneously to its production.

The service aspect of distributing electricity is, therefore, important—a fact which has not gone unrecognized by the electricity industry. With increasing liberalization of electricity markets, the energy companies are, in fact, emphasizing the importance of their service (Hartmann and Apaolaza Ibáñez 2007; Hartmann and Ibáñez 2006). Those above factors could imply that energy companies should explicitly emphasize service branding, but the main focus can also shift away from following an explicit branding strategy to a focus on customer equity instead.

## Commodity Branding

Only limited research has been undertaken in this specific area of branding. However, pure commodities have been researched in a few different marketing sectors, including electricity (Hartmann and Apaolaza Ibáñez 2007; Hartmann et al. 2005; Wiedmann 2004, 2005), the forest industry (Tokarczyk and Hansen 2006), beef (Morrison and Eastburn 2006), and water (Wilk 2006).

## Generic Commodity Branding

Despite limited attention to branded commodities, they have been promoted for decades (Anderson and Bowyer 2001; Ward et al. 1985). Most of the known cases involve generic products like agricultural commodities. Well-known slogans related to such promotional activates are “California Raisins” and “Got Milk?” These and many other examples of commodity promotion programs show that they have proved to be effective (Alston et al. 2007). In the USA, where agricultural commodity industries such as beef and dairy have been among the first to build strong commodity promotion programs, \$1 billion is spent on such programs yearly (Alston et al. 2007). The substantial amount spent is perhaps not surprising since economists have calculated that each dollar spent on advertising agricultural products, such as eggs, milk, beef, prunes, and almonds, yields \$3 to \$6 of additional revenue to producers (Varian 2006).

## Specific Commodity Branding

Although commodities have been promoted on a generic level, branding of commodity products has received little more attention than that of pure commodities as previously mentioned. DuPont's success with Lycra has been mentioned as an example of successful branding (van Riel et al. 2005). DuPont brands most of its products despite many of them being ingredients for other manufacturers' products. Well-known examples of their brand are Teflon, Kevlar, and Lycra, all of which could be regarded as a key source of sustainable competitive advantage in a B2B setting (Gordon et al. 1993; Kumar et al. 2003; van Riel et al. 2005).

## Commodities Differentiated into Brands

Within the electricity industry, various players are urged to adopt branding principles for use in the American electricity market that had recently been deregulated at the time (Brew and Phelps 1998; Novak and Lyman 1998; Pesce 2002). Several authors have written about how to turn a product from a commodity into a brand in various industries. Examples are (1) "How Owens-Corning turned a commodity into a brand," which discusses how Fiberglass insulations from Owens-Corning were turned into a brand after changing their appearance into a distinctive pink color followed by a national campaign and added service to customers (Doherty 1986); (2) "Brand power moves BASF past commodity," which discusses how the chemical manufacturer BASF turned a commodity into a brand by differentiating through personal services like R&D support and on-site field support (Lamons 2004). Furthermore, there are articles that argue the need for turning commodities into brands such as "Pitching the invisible commodity: Branding power in retail markets" (Richter 2000). It is worth keeping in mind the discussion on service brands before. Adopting the relationship standpoint accompanying the service perspective, it may be stated that there is no such thing as an undifferentiated commodity as the service aspect of providing

it can always be differentiated and thus branded. In fact, in the service marketing discourse since the 1980s, electricity has largely been treated as a service.

## The Way Forward

It is possible to view electricity branding in retail markets from a strict product branding perspective. Viewed from a product perspective, branding electricity could be considered as more or less a technical issue, although the process of branding electricity also involves various support structures to assist consumers' in different practices of electricity purchases. Viewed from that perspective, branding would emphasize both the core product, electricity, and associated extended offerings. Those include various processes and interactions that consumers experience and on which they base their image of a particular brand. The process of branding electricity, therefore, includes an extended relationship aspect which product branding theories only include to a limited degree. Furthermore, due to the undifferentiated nature of electricity, only relying on the product branding perspective is disputable.

By adopting a service branding perspective, the undifferentiated nature of electricity can be circumvented, but more importantly, it would include the relationship with consumers and the accompanying interactive processes. It may be stated that the task is not merely to brand a particular product, but also the process of providing it to the consumers. Viewing branding from a service branding perspective is therefore valuable, since it adds a helpful perspective and ties electricity branding to both corporate branding and industrial branding as in both cases relationships are emphasized. Looking particularly at corporate branding, the image of the energy companies themselves is of course highly significant and in many cases, the corporate image may dominate a company's branded products or services.



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