Living with Brands in Industrial Contexts

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Abstract

- **Purpose:** To cast BtoB branding in a different light than previously done by today's fast-growing body of literature on the topic while examining it from the standpoint of customers' life experience and the web of relationships in which they are suspended.
- **Research method:** A qualitative research based on in-depth interviews has been developed in the form of customer-centric narratives and listening to personal stories, lived experiences and eliciting meanings through metaphors and projections.
- **Research findings:** Field interviews support the contention that customer members experience their professional lives as a collection of loyalties to other individuals or groups of people (e.g., loyalty to a firm's people, loyalty to a supplier's people, loyalty to a customer's people, loyalty to oneself, etc.) and that inside this collection, brand loyalty appears to be of little importance. However, brand loyalty is not totally absent from the picture: brands could be resources that consumer members draw on in order to juggle their important loyalties.
- **Main contribution:** This paper allows us to redress a gap in marketers' understanding of BtoB brand loyalty: when we shift from a brand/organisational perspective—as used by a majority of the previous research—to a customer perspective, brand loyalty appears not to be of paramount importance in an industrial context.

Keywords

Branding, Customer Viewpoint, Loyalty, People

Paper type

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Introduction

"Branding has received little attention in BtoB markets." This sentence, which has been ritually repeated in the opening pages of the scarce academic papers dealing with BtoB branding since the 1980s, is not valid anymore. The years 2004 and 2005 saw the flowering of a dozen papers that focused on this topic in journals such as *Industrial Marketing Management*, the *Journal of Business to Business Marketing* and the *Journal of Brand Management*. And in 2006 the first call for papers for a special issue dedicated to "branding in business markets" was launched by the *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing.*

In these recent papers, industrial branding is considered as a multidimensional construct that includes not only how the customers view the physical product, but also the logistics, customer support, corporate image and policy that accompany the product (McQuiston, 2004) together with all that can create an emotional connection with buyers (Lynch and de Chernatony, 2004). Branding is now thought of as having playing a major role in the decision-making process, even if price and delivery appear still more important. Research also suggests that a price premium can be obtained when a company has a high brand equity (Bendixen et al., 2004). Overall a major statement that is perpetuated in this latest literature is that brand equity is alive and well in the business-to-business sector (Gordon et al., 1993; Bendixen et al., 2004; McQuiston, 2004). Thus, strong brands and strong brand loyalty can be major assets for industrial suppliers (Webster and Keller, 2004). A new agenda for academic research and new concerns for practitioners seem to be served in this forthcoming era of business marketing. Recipes and best practices are provided—sometime without strong empirical support—in order to help managers gain insights and principles that can guarantee a happy ending.

The objective of this paper is to challenge these statements by proposing an alternative perspective on the topic. More specifically, we suggest adopting a critical approach while investigating customer experiences with brands and the dynamics of brand loyalties. As branding is not equally important to all companies, all customers or in all purchase situations (Mudambi, 2002), we put forth the argument that existing knowledge still lacks a deep and comprehensive understanding of these constructs in business contexts. The paper opens by reviewing existing literature on the basic constructs of BtoB branding and BtoB brand loyalty through the discussion of the concept of loyalty in BtoB studies. The identification and discussion of gaps will then provide the groundwork for the proposal of new research questions and the adoption of a different perspective on the topic. The second part of the paper describes the design of a current research project. The final discussion of the preliminary findings attempts to contribute to the present debate by addressing a different and alternative way of looking at BtoB branding.

State of the art of BtoB branding and brand loyalty

BtoB branding

Literature on BtoB branding has been characterized by varying levels of enthusiasm and involvement. So far, there is no agreement about definitive evidence of branding importance in BtoB contexts. From the viewpoint of empirical results and implications, prudent instructions coexist with prescriptive and enthusiastic positions. A lively debate on basic assumptions is still animating academic exchange and practitioners' concerns. Nevertheless, models for effective and successful BtoB branding are developing and enriching handbooks with new content and challenges for managers. As a result, the latest contributions seem at least to overcome partially the scepticism surrounding the potential of branding generally found in previous literature (e.g., Saunders and Watt, 1979; Sinclair and Seward, 1988; Lorge, 1998; Shipley and Howard, 1993).

In the 1970s, practitioners and scholars used to point out the difficult and useless efforts by some companies to transfer successful consumer branding strategies in BtoB contexts (Saunders and Watt, 1979; Sinclair and Seward, 1988; Shipley and Howard, 1993). Conventional wisdom saw the main obstacles in the specific characteristics of business markets compared to consumer markets. Studies on the effectiveness of brand names, for instance, showed that those employed for industrial commodities were confusing and ineffective (Saunders and Watt, 1979). Moreover, almost all the textbooks on business marketing avoided dealing with the topic even from a critical perspective. These first negative premises have influenced the basic assumptions of the effectiveness of brand strategies and have produced conflicting results. Some authors concluded that despite the wide use of brand names there was currently no evidence of the effectiveness of branding efforts (Shipley and Howard, 1993); and for others, only a few producers with products of the highest perceived quality are able to develop effective brand strategies (Sinclair and Seward, 1988).

Since the early 1990s, Gordon et al. (1993) have demonstrated that brand equity—intended as the set of associations and behaviours by a brand's customers and channel members, which ensures a greater volume and margin than could obtain without the brand name—is highly present in BtoB contexts. In a study on the impact of brand on price setting, Firth (1993) showed how a rise in price of 4% could be attributable to the adoption of a strong brand name. Hutton (1997) reinforced the findings of Gordon et al. (1993) by demonstrating that brand equity exists in different forms (willingness to pay a premium price, recommending the brand to peers and giving special consideration to another product with the same brand name), and that a halo effect can positively or negatively influence an evaluation of products of the same brand. Using a situational approach, Hutton's findings provide evidence that brand equity has a different effect depending on several variables: product complexity, fear of personal failure in the decision, time and resource constraints. Replicating in some way the study of Shipley and Howard (1993), Michell et al. (2001) improved previous knowledge by integrating concepts and contributions from branding literature in the field of consumer marketing. Their findings have reinforced the positive approach towards BtoB branding.

Taken together, these contributions have provided a platform for the development of a different stream of research addressed by Mudambi and colleagues (1997, 2002), who have in fact provided two basic contributions. First, they introduced the concept of intangible factors as important elements in industrial decision making on brands; second, they highlighted the importance of studying the expected value for the customer of these factors in order to understand properly how a brand can be successful. Adopting this customer perspective, their empirical evidence has provided useful insights and encouraged further research. Mudambi (2002), for instance, has identified different clusters of customers and purchasing situations related to different attitudes towards industrial brands.

If we consider all together these different contributions, some of the conflicting results can be ascribed to the varying perspectives and sources of data used by researchers. The identification of the most suitable business contexts—in term of products or purchase situations—for an effective branding strategy still seems to lack a definitive solution (compare, for instance, results by Mudambi et al., 1997, with conclusions by Sinclair and Seward, 1988). In our opinion, the group of studies on customers' perspectives and attitudes have filled some gaps in the literature and overcome some contradictions. Now it has become evident that BtoB branding cannot be compared completely to consumer branding and that even basic concepts have to be tested and adapted when we switch to BtoB. With this view, we can interpret some recent contributions on customer behaviour that have also introduced the concept of brand loyalty and its relationship with brand equity (e.g., Bendixen et al., 2004; Bennet et al., 2005; van Riel et al., 2005) or started to analyse brand communities in industrial contexts (Andersen, 2005).

As they are less concerned with our research purposes, the contributions that adopt a managerial or prescriptive approach in providing models for effective branding strategies are viewed differently. With varying levels of direct empirical foundations, they suggest adapting existing models for BtoB settings (Low and Blois, 2002; Kuhn and Alpert, 2004; Moorthi, 2004; Webster and Keller, 2004; Bengtsson and Servais, 2005; Anderson and Carpenter, 2005) or defining new proposals built on BtoB literature and industrial markets (e.g., Blois, 2004; Lynch and Chernatony, 2004).

To sum up, all these results suffer from the brand/supplier perspective used by the researchers. Everything is looked at as if branding has naturally become a major component of industrial life and as if client members were eager to deal with brands on an everyday basis and thus willing to become loyal to certain preferred brands (e.g., show brand loyalty). All the empirical surveys have accepted assumptions that can be considered true and valid for consumers because they are sustained by an extensive literature and a strong research tradition. For this main reason, they have found that not all models and previous findings can be applied to industrial customers (e.g., Kuhn and Alpert, 2004). To our surprise, many of the contributions have also mirrored the perspectives of suppliers while investigating the reactions and feelings of customers—considering, for instance, the focus of their brand strategies and the content of their messages. As a consequence, they may have missed deriving insightful considerations from adopting alternative angles (i.e., multiple customer perspectives of different members of a buying centre, influences of organisational subcultures and so on).

BtoB loyalty

Following BtoC theories, BtoB brand loyalty is now presented as a two-dimensional construct comprising attitudinal brand loyalty and behavioural brand loyalty (Bennett et al., 2005). Attitudinal brand loyalty consists of the attitudes of the customer towards the brand, its attitudes towards intention to repurchase and its brand commitment. Behavioural brand loyalty is defined as the customer's tendency to repurchase a brand as revealed through behaviour that can be measured and that directly affects brand sales.

However, the very concept of loyalty is not central to major BtoB marketing theories. Both the interaction approach and the network approach do not use it as a major construct, whereas they build on the concept of the "atmosphere" of the relationship and its five dimensions (Håkansson, 1982; Hallen and Sandstrom, 1991): power/dependence, trust/opportunism, closeness/distance, cooperation/conflict and expectations. Rather than to speak of one-sided loyalty (e.g., customer loyalty), BtoB researchers prefer to speak of the stable phase of the relationship between organisations: "when the companies have reached a certain stability in their learning about each other and in their investments and commitment to the relationship" (Ford et al., 1998, p. 37). Thus, mutual commitment seems to be a more appropriate concept than loyalty. This stable phase could come about through vertical integrations, alliances, partnerships and other forms of cooperative arrangements among organisations (Ploetner and Ehret, 2006). At a more interpersonal level, this stable phase could lead to friendship as Cunningham and Turnbull (1982, p. 306) point out: "some relationships exist purely for private social reasons and are not necessary for the business objectives of either company. . . . When one of the people changes functions, so the legitimate reason for contact is removed, yet contact is still maintained."

As a consequence, customer loyalty has received little attention from "pure" BtoB researchers. Indeed, most of the texts dealing with customer loyalty in a BtoB context are written by BtoC researchers (Auh and Shih, 2005; Costabile, 2000). However, there is an overall idea shared among BtoB researchers that relationship quality influences interorganisational loyalty in a business-to-business context (Hetesi and Veres, 2004). For example, Miller et al. (2005) showed that in order to maintain customer loyalty to the supplier, a supplier may enhance four distinct aspects of relationship quality: trust, commitment, satisfaction and service quality. In the same vein, some works investigate the impact of interpersonal loyalty in a business-to-business context. For example, Bove and Johnson (2006) found that the degree of personal loyalty (e.g., customer loyalty to one employee) is the most important contributor to business loyalty in the BtoB service industry.

In this context of scarce interest to the concept of loyalty and of disinterest in branding, the very idea of "brand loyalty" appears rather odd to BtoB marketing researchers even if some distinguished academics such as Webster and Keller (2004) declare that strong brands can create more customer loyalty. Seldom are the works dealing with BtoB brand loyalty (Bennett et al., 2005) and their results not counter-intuitive: "Quality, reliability, and performance were rated as primary factors [of brand loyalty] by a clear majority of respondents" of the Michell et al. (2001, p. 422) survey.

Objectives and purposes of the research

Research questions

From the previous discussion flow rather naive research questions: to what are company members loyal? what is the nature of those loyalties? and how (if at all) do brands and services relate to company members' important loyalties? In order to answer these questions, we shift from a brand/supplier perspective to a client member perspective. Just as Price et al. (n.d.) recently showed in their research, we cast BtoB branding in a different light by examining it from the standpoint of the customers' viewpoint, the web of relationships in which they are suspended. For that, we use a client-centric loyalty framework (Price et al., n.d.) that departs significantly from current marketing thought. It assumes that customer members' most important loyalties rarely implicate brands directly and that customer member loyalties to brands are frequently mediated through more important commitments such as interpersonal relationships or interorganisational interdependencies (see all the IMP Group's literature). Using an inductive approach we integrate diverse literatures with field interviews of customer members to identify to what and/or whom they are loyal and how brand relationships enter into these significant loyalties.

In more detail, our main efforts are devoted to unpacking meanings and exploring the dynamics of brand experiences, identifying actors involved, describing the processes and discourses arising between individuals and groups belonging to both types of organisations and identifying the customer and the suppliers involved. Adopting a multilevel approach typical to organisational studies (e.g., House et al., 1995; Morgeson and Hofmann, 1999), we'll investigate behaviours, meanings and feelings related to supplier brands at the intrasubjective (individual) and intersubjective (group) levels, trying, when possible, to explore also the collective level (organisation).

In connecting and triangulating these different levels, our aim is to catch the dialectical process of meaning construction and its dynamics. In our assumptions, in fact, we consider brand experiences within organisations as an intertwining process in which personal stories and events interact continuously with organisational events and routines. In that environment, brands and personal meanings are embedded in systems in which there is little room for free choice co-living, at the same time having high involvement or lack of interest towards the same brands. Brand narratives arise from a system of meanings that can be spontaneous or strongly mediated by power and specific competences.

Research design

We have developed a qualitative research based on in-depth interviews and direct observations by applying the interpretive perspective typical of postmodern research that has been introduced recently to the IMP community (see Cova and Salle, 2003; Borghini et al., 2004, 2005). We'll collect data in the form of "narratives" of brand experiences, listening to personal stories and described emotions and eliciting meanings through metaphors and projections. According to the practices recommended by specialized literature (e.g., Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994), we refined our specific research guidelines after the first rounds of data collection and analysis.

The leading research guidelines are built around the following themes:

a. What is your job?
b. In your job, to whom or what do you think you are particularly loyal?
c. What can you say about loyalty to suppliers in your job?
d. What can you say about loyalty to brands in your job?
e. Which are the brands known/used at work for which you feel a sense of loyalty or any other type of connection?
f. What are the drivers of those connections? Personal experience? Collective myths about the brand? Constraints?
g. What is the role of other colleagues in your brand-meaning constructions?
h. What is the degree of freedom in "living" or refusing these brand meanings and connections?
i. What are the differences between individual and more collective brand meanings? How are they shared and negotiated?

As stated previously, analysis will be developed at different levels (individual, group and organisation) in order to find out differences in role, meaning construction and dynamics.

Expected findings and contributions

Even if it is premature to anticipate the main findings and potential contribution of a work-in-progress research, our first observations depict emerging themes relating to multiple functions played by brands in industrial contexts. As well as the ones highlighted in previous research (e.g., McDowell Mudambi et al., 1997; Michell et al., 2001), we'll discuss the role of brands in personal histories and experiences, organisational conflicts and dynamics. The findings and following discussion will contribute to enrich previous knowledge on industrial branding and, most of all, will address the adoption of new perspectives of research.

Preliminary results

In the following section we will highlight the major topics discussed during our first in-depth interviews with managers from customer companies: a Director of Industrial Processes and Purchasing in Valeo (Automobile, France), a Programme Director in Messier-Bugatti (Aerospace, France) and a Vice President of Supply Management & Procurement in ABB (Process Automation, Italy). As much as possible we will contrast and/or make a rapprochement with what was declared in previous research. More specifically, we will refer to recent research on BtoB brand loyalty (e.g., van Riel et al., 2005) and to contributions that adopt a managerial or prescriptive approach to BtoB branding by providing models for effective branding strategies and especially the Webster and Keller (2004) paper, which outlines "some of the distinguishing characteristics of industrial branding" and offers "some guidelines to success with industrial brands" (p. 388).

Brand is not important

- "There are companies which have a brand . . . that is not really important for us."
- "Brands do not have any real impact."
- "This can happen sometimes [e.g., the impact of brands]."

These and other recurring comments of our informants allow us to make an initial relevant statement. It is not possible to generalize the relevance of BtoB branding without detailing specificities and profiling boundaries. Our findings can be contrasted to different opinions discussed in previous literature. "Some of the most valuable and powerful brands in the world belong to industrial markets: ABB, Caterpillar, Cisco, DuPont, FedEx, GE, Hewlett Packard, IBM, Intel and Siemens are just a few of many examples" (Webster and Keller, 2004, p. 388). And also: "Brand equity appears to play a significant role in industrial branding" (van Riel et al., 2005, p. 845).

Brand loyalty is far less important than people loyalty

- "I've tended to follow people and ideas more than brands."
- "Even if Messier Bugatti changed its name, customers wouldn't care since they would still be dealing with the same individuals and have the same level of trust."
- "I can't say that we are loyal in this sense [towards brands] . . . our reference point is the company. The company. Relationships that you establish with people . . ."

As Gordon et al. (1993) already commented, attitudes and loyalty towards the brand are often confused with attitudes and loyalty towards the supplier. Here, we have clear evidence that this misunderstanding is related to the fact that brand loyalty is basically not recognized as such by customers. When thinking about the nature and level of their loyalty, what comes to most people's minds are people, relationships and past experience with an organisation.

Supplier people loyalty

- "They have been loyal suppliers for 12 years, after encountering many vicissitudes together [e.g., plant start-up in Mexico] . . . . We slept in the same small Mexican hotels . . . . Following our shared experiences in Mexico, they all came with me when I asked them to go to Japan. The only thing they asked was how long I was going to stay with the customer."
- "Loyalty was so strong that it created a lot of internal pressure to change the supplier team since some people thought 'I was getting ripped off.'"

This topic is totally in tune with Bove and Johnson's (2005) conclusions: rather than fear, and therefore discourage, personal loyalty from developing, managers should capitalize on personal loyalty's contribution to business loyalty.

Customer people loyalty

- "Not only a working relationship but also a friendship."

We have no evidence in previous studies of this type of loyalty even if it is argued that people from the supplier and their technical competence are important in order to build brand awareness (Bendixen, 2004). Only Lynch and de Chernatony (2004) have highlighted the potential influence of salespeople in developing and communicating an emotional connection with buyers. What our research has discovered, however, is a wider and more relevant role played by the supplier's people in their interaction with the customer's people (Cunningham and Turnbull, 1982).

Company people loyalty

- "I said no to head hunters because of a feeling of loyalty to Valeo and because I didn't want to betray the trust of the people who had helped me to get ahead in the company."
- "This implies a great level of trustworthiness . . . between myself and my company and the reverse . . . that sense of loyalty, way of minding your company interests, a sense of mutual loyalty . . ."

Loyalty to oneself

- "There is loyalty to one's own sense of ethics, convictions and values. . . . After 15 years in this industry, the decisions I was beginning to make (like hidden delocalisations) ran counter to my personal ethos so I left the group."

Loyalty is more a matter of a web of relationships in which a brand can be suspended. Brand loyalty does not exist independently of other loyalties. It is part of a bigger game and rules.

No brand loyalty because brand names change too often

- "Nowadays Dresser has a different corporate name . . . . [T]hey have changed it recently. If I link a brand name to the corporate brand and this one changes over time one then would ask, "'Who knows it?'"
- "This can happen sometimes but with all the restructurings and takeovers, such as Snecma-Sagem did when it launched Safran, nobody gives a damn about brand concepts, what creates connections are products and entities."

It has been often recognized that "typical industrial brand is the company name" (Webster and Keller, 2004, p. 397) and that assessing manufacturers' brand name equity is more appropriate than measuring the equity of product brands (Kuhn and Alpert, 2004). Actually customers are confused by changes in corporate names; therefore, it is considered ineffective to base loyalty antecedents on brand names. As they cannot use these references, they tend to refer to other loyalty levers within their suppliers' strategy and behaviours.

More supplier loyalty than brand loyalty

- "A company's reputation differs from its brand name. The brand per se is not what defines the quality of a company's teams."
- "We tend to establish relationships with our suppliers not for their brands but rather for their level of services. We look at it in order to establish a loyal relationship. Not within a product brand but in the services they provide . . ."
- "It's hard for me to link a brand to a product. It's easier to link the brand to the company, to the relation I have with the persons, to the relationship that we have developed . . ."

The previous claims on the relevance of business relationships are strongly supported. Comments such as “the customer wants an ongoing relationship with a reliable supplier of quality products and services” (Webster and Keller, 2004, p. 397) and “relationship and partnership customers will likely to place greater value on the trustworthiness, reliability and corporate credibility dimensions” (Webster and Keller, 2004, p. 396) seem to be valuable.

But brands could be important for other parties

- “A brand . . . does not really matter for us as much as for our customers . . . . [O]ften the brand is something which is important for our customers . . . and, of course, if they want it [i.e., *branded product from our suppliers*] we provide it . . .”
- “Production and methods specialists affect the choice of a brand like Télémecanique**.** For them *‘it has to be* Télémecanique *or nothing at all’*—they’re against any kind of Japanese machine.**”**
- “They want the Rolls Royce in their field, and this means a brand.”

It has been said that “users play a more important role in the buying process” (Webster and Keller, 2004, p. 397). Considering customers’ behaviour and their attitudes towards brands, our data do support this type of statement. Moreover, other major players and influencers seem to frame their preferences and attitudes.

Brands as a relational resource

- “Moreover, this affects employees’ sense of loyalty—they will stay if someone buys the brand for them, otherwise they’ll go because of a lack of appreciation for their true worth.”
- “This is an honour-driven logic: if my firm buys Télémecanique, it’s because I’m worth it! Here, the brand of the machine mirrors the status and recognition awarded to its operator and to the precision and professionalism of his/her work. For technicians, it’s that or nothing at all.”

Here we have a new perspective, the emerging of different dynamics. Brands can be used as relational resources—within the organisation and outside or it—in the relationships with customers, as shown in these comments: ”People are buying solutions to two problems: the organisation’s economic and strategic problem and their own personal desire to obtain individual achievement and rewards” (Webster and Keller, 2004, p. 395). ”[E]ach individual is trying to achieve organisational goals subject to resource and other constraints in a way that minimises risk and maximises the probability of pay-offs, consistent with his or her individual needs and goals” (Webster and Keller, 2004, p. 395). “[W]hile the risk of organisational failure is a concern, the fear of personal failure may be the bigger factor in brand decision” (Hutton, 1997).

However, some brand names resonate

- “Some brands actually mean something and people talk about them with pride, saying things like ‘we’ve bought a Mandelli.’ The company must have been in existence for a long time and always manufactured products that are not only very good but quite specific and specialised, meaning products that don’t cover a whole range of areas. Plus the company can’t be some group with subsidiaries—it has to have had a long history. . . . A single product company.”
- “Dassault, for example, isn’t a brand but a manufacturer who makes planes (Dassault Aviation) and systems (Dassault Systèmes).”
- “Roller bearings made by Timken, for instance, since they are the world’s only single source supplier of wheels and brakes create the brand. You don’t even ask for an alternative since Timken’s very name means great service. They made their reputation in logistics and engineering. Alcan, on the other hand, is too diversified for their name to represent a clearly visible product. It’s not tangible enough and people find it hard to identify the entity or product.”
- “These are generally older brands, except in the IT business. Certain family companies that remain attached to their original values, notably German firms, operate brands that serve as benchmarks in their particular sectors:

    - Krauss-Maffei for injection moulding machines
    - Artburg for vertical injection moulding machines
    - Otto Bihler (Swiss) for wire forming machines
    - Silicon Graphics for CAD (being the opposite of HP)."
- "In my opinion, very often the brand is linked to a [*specific*] product, to something that can be remembered."

It is to be noted that the short list of "real" brands (Artburg, Dresser, Krauss-Maffei, Mandelli, Nuovo Pignone, Otto Bihler, Silicon Graphics, Telemecanique, and Timken) recalled by our interviewees has little to do with the lists drawn by previous works (van Riel et al., 2005; Webster and Keller, 2004). These are less global brands supported by world companies rather than niche brands supported by family businesses.

There is room for fruitful investments in BtoB branding. These first findings do need a deeper investigation. However combined with previous empirical results (e.g., Bennet, 2005; Hutton, 1997; Mudambi, 2002; Bendixen et al., 2004; van Riel, 2005), they support some basic claims on branding strategies: "[P]roduct-related brand associations are likely to play a more important role than no-product-related associations for successful industrial branding" (Webster and Keller, 2004, p. 396). "[F]or capital equipment, the focus (of branding) may shift more to the product offering itself, with an emphasis upon underlying technology and product performance attributes" (Webster and Keller, 2004, p. 392).

Conclusion

Our preliminary investigation of brand loyalty in BtoB from the standpoint of the customer members' viewpoint leads us to highlight the idealistic/utopian stance taken by the current literature on BtoB branding. As a conclusive comment, we want to redress a gap in marketers' understanding of BtoB brand loyalty: when we shift from a brand/organisational perspective as used by a large majority of previous research to a customer perspective, brand loyalty appears not to be of paramount importance. Field interviews support the contention that ordinarily customer members experience their professional lives as a collection of loyalties to other persons or groups of persons (loyalty to firm's people, loyalty to supplier's people, loyalty to customer's people, loyalty to oneself) and that inside this collection, brand loyalty appears to be of little importance. Indeed, consumers' allegiance to a brand is just a tiny piece of the web of loyalties within which consumer' members nest. However, brand loyalty is not totally absent from the picture. Coherently with Price et al.'s (n.d.) findings, in a BtoC context, we discovered that brands could be resources that consumer members draw on in order to juggle their important loyalties: a purchaser will manage his/her company to be loyal to a specific brand (even if this is not his/her preferred choice) in order to boost certain employee's loyalty to the company. In this context, brands become "relational resources" for the actors inside and outside the company. We really trust that this is a research avenue for BtoB branding that will help marry interaction, relationship and network theories with a brand loyalty stream of thought.

However, this working paper makes no claims for the generalizability of our preliminary findings. Nor do we claim that we have correctly or exhaustively categorized the loyalty BtoB people care for. These are topics for further research.

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