Understanding orientation of corporate brand personality in business-to-business markets

Abstract

Corporate personality scale available to marketing researchers has been useful for assessing the characteristics desired by customers of international brands in consumer markets. The objective of this research was to understand the personality characteristics that business customers look for in a person who represents a brand. Data suggested that characteristics that business customers look for in a person who represents a brand are different from the characteristics that its consumers would seek. It was empirically found that a human face that represents a brand can be associated with its own identified characteristics and these characteristics influence the brand selection criteria of resellers in highly competitive business-to-business markets. A theoretical framework drawn on existing literature was empirically tested to develop the scale.

Key words: Business customers, Corporate brand personality, International brands

Introduction

A linkage that customers try to make between humans and brands has been a subject of interest to marketers because of its influence on their brand selection criteria (Aaker, 1997; Azoulay and Kapferer, 2003). The concept existed in literature since 1950s and can be traced back to 1959 in a research conducted by Evans (1959) who studied the influence of different objective and psychological factors on the choice of brand made by consumers. Five dimensional brand personality scale developed by Aaker (1997) is based on the metaphoric attribute of the brand i.e. 'brand as a person'. The scale developed by Aaker (1997) has been widely used to measure the impact of brand personality on attitude of customers towards the brand.

Research that measures the impact of brand extensions on brand personality emphasizes that it can help brands to motivate its customer for a purchase and be loyal to the brand (Fournier, 1994; Diamantopoulous et al., 2005). Chun and Davies (2003) studied the influence of metaphors on customers and associated the root metaphor of the brand i.e. 'brand as a person' to the customers' understanding of personality of the brand based on relationships that customers have with the brands. Researchers have used such knowledge about customers to understand loyalty of customers towards the brand, reputation and values of the brand perceived by customers (Caprara et al., 2001; Keller, 2003; Urde, 2003; Aggarwal, 2004).

Extending same knowledge at the corporate level helped development of a corporate character scale that can measure the effect of scale indicators on the reputation of the organization that is reflected in customer behavior in consumer markets (Davies et al., 2004; Money and Hillenbrand, 2006; Anisimova, 2007). This paper is an attempt to understand the behaviour of customers in business markets based on the approach taken by previous researchers from the context of consumer markets.

Theoretical foundation

Marketing literature draws on metaphoric personification to identify the qualities that form the personality and becomes the basis of differentiation that influences customer behaviour (Davies et al., 2004). The scales available to researchers measure the behaviour of customers in consumer markets (Anderson, 1968; Markham, 1972; Biel, 1993; Aaker, 1997). There is no scale available to academic and practicing marketers that provide the qualities of a person who represents a brand specifically preferred by customers in business markets. Based on the review of literature this research is an attempt to assess the benefits of using metaphoric personification as a point of reference for developing relationships in business markets for an impact on purchase behaviour of customers (Roper et al., 2002; Cleopatra and Moutinho, 2008).

Predominant view of researchers about 'brand as a person' is a psychological aspect (Delgado-Ballester and Munuera-Aleman, 2001). For business markets, it has been highlighted as a generic personality trait that influences corporate reputation and brand management (Silva and Alwi, 2007). Brand personality researchers have highlighted its role in developing relationships and have linked benefits of its usage such as commitment, trust and mutual benefits to social exchange theory (Patterson and O'Malley, 2006). When a person represents a brand and tries to develop an informal interpersonal relationship with customers to share brand knowledge, the person acts as a source domain of information about the brand and transfers the information to customers who behave as a target domain (Hunt and Menon, 1995; Keller, 2003; Silva and Alwi, 2008). Such a transfer of knowledge nurtures trustworthiness and dependability (Scott 2003; Kannan and Tan, 2006).

The utilitarian approach taken by Keller (2001) to propose the model for building customer-based brand equity if applied to business markets can explain how the personality characteristics

satisfy customers and fulfill their needs. The four steps identified by Keller (2001) for building a brand are creating awareness, developing favourable associations, eliciting positive response and nurturing relationships. These stages are based on performance, judgment, resonance, salience, imagery and feelings as blocks required for building a brand (Keller, 2001). As represented by Keller (2001) in customer based brand equity pyramid, the state of resonance is based on judgement and feelings developed built on imagery and performance which help customers to make a purchase decision in favour of the brand. The utilitarian concepts and complex ideas about brand when presented by a person representing brand as a communicative artifact of brand, result in resonance and judgment because it gets stored as sensory data in the minds of the customers (Scott and Vargas, 2007).

Resonance influences developmental stages of harmonious relationships and encourages customers to actively engage with the brand, interact and demonstrate behavioural loyalty and attitudinal attachment towards the brand (Joy and Sherry, 2003; Keller, 2001).   The intangible associations that customers have with the brands are relationships with brands based on the personality traits that link personality of brand to a person who represents the brand (Aaker, 1997; Keller, 2001; Chen, 2001; Chun and Davies, 2006).   Personality traits are attributes that influence responses of customers based on their emotions towards the brand and help them to differentiate between brands (Patterson, 1999).   Literature on advertising explains relationship as a cognitive and effective behavioural process that operates in the minds, allows drawing of inferences and construction of opinions based on the observation made by customers about attitude (Blackston, 2000; Braun-Latour and Zaltman, 2006).

Selection of a corporate brand by customers depends on their assessment of the attitude of the company behind the brand that they are dealing with, towards its customers (Blackston, 2000). Blackston (2000) extended the concept of relationships to corporate brands for understanding the relationship between responses of customers and element of trust in relationship based on social exchange theory. Role of individuals in developing relationships of trust with customers and satisfying them by being pro-active for influencing brand selection criteria of customers has been discussed in detail (Doherty and Alexander, 2004; Gunasekaran and Ngai, 2004). Pro-activeness as proposed by Blackston (2000) is a relationship of supportiveness that is customer-centered and depends on the feeling of customer about being listened to and responded appropriately.

Representation of a brand requires alignment of image of the brand with values demonstrated by an internal source that can be a person who represents the brand (Aaker et al., 2001). Role of person who represents the brand in developing person-to-person relationships by communicating brand's attitudes to its customers has been viewed as an organization's internal source, used with an objective to inform, persuade and remind customers about the offerings made by the brand ((Chun and Davies, 2006; Braun-Latour and Zaltman, 2006). Shaping expectations of customers in business-to-business markets involves developing person-to-person relationships which are based on the communication ability and brand imagery of the representative of the brand as a corporate character (Aaker, 1997; Azoulay and Kapferer, 2004).

Expectations of business customers are different from the expectations of customers in consumer markets (Zeithaml et al., 1993). Corporate character scale developed by Davies et al., (2003) identifies five types of human characteristics as dimensions for measuring the effect of corporate personality on satisfaction of customers and their ability to differentiate in competitive markets. Five dimensions identified by Davies et al., (2003) are competence, agreeable, enterprise, chic and ruthless. Marketing literature contributes to knowledge on corporate brand personality in consumer market but unfortunately there is lack of literature that can explain the influence of characteristics of corporate brand personality on business customers of the brand. Objective of this study was to empirically contribute to this stream of research. An exploratory study for testing the difference between characteristics or dimensions of brand personality expected by business

customers as to customers in consumer markets was performed. This paper presents insights and analysis based on the data collected from business customers which collectively enforces a new thinking for industrial marketing researchers.

Research Method

Inadequacy of existing literature to differentiate between the characteristics of brand that customers in business markets look for, this research study adopted a mix method approach (Churchill, 1979). An epistemological paradigm shift requires rhetorical and philosophical arguments combined with empirical data (Glaser and Strauss, 1999; Hammersley, 2003). Research design called for a set of respondents who were decision makers for the firms in the business selling products offered by international brands and was dealing with representatives of these international firms owning the brands. Review of literature for understanding existing theories was supported by preliminary field interviews with a small sample of respondents who were chosen to provide expert views on the topic being investigated (Spiggle, 1994).

Data Collection

Research data was collected from purchasing authorities in reseller organizations of international brands. Respondents were asked to name the representative who was interacting with them frequently at the operational level on behalf of the company who owned the brand they were selling. The unit of analysis for the study was the customer firm of international brands represented by purchase decision maker of international brands for resale. Data was collected during qualitative interviews from 11 senior managers of firms who had significant experience of dealing with international brands. Interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes each. The analysis of data collected during personal interviews provided new insights into the research being performed.

For qualitative data collection respondents were asked a set of structured questions which were worded carefully allowing them to reflect on them with relevant examples. Sometimes to keep respondents focused around the research question and within the framework, some probing questions had to be asked by the researcher. In case of some respondents, researcher could take only detailed notes because respondents were not comfortable with the concept of their interview being recorded.

Respondents were asked following broad questions with some probing questions:
1. Who do you think represents the brand that you sell?
2. What are the type of characteristics that you look for in a person who represents the brand to you?

The responses were analysed and results very useful for next stage of quantitative data collection as they enabled the researcher to identify new, relevant and missing but specific themes. The themes that emerged from personal interviews of industry experts were helpful in assessing the face validity of the constructs and relationships that were conceptualized to develop a theoretical model. Based on the qualitative data analysis, a research instrument was prepared for collection of quantitative data from the field. Before sending the questionnaire to the field for final data collection, it was important to test the reliability and validity of the questionnaire. Hence, it was given for auditing to some of the marketing lecturers, a set of marketing research students for feedback and a set of respondents in reseller organizations.

Modeling Approach

Factor analysis of the data collected from a set of 368 respondents using the research instrument was found to be appropriate. Items that emerged together from exploratory factor analysis using varimax rotation represented latent variables that have been tabulated in Table 1. The accuracy of the data collected and appropriateness of the factors was tested by studying value of Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of sampling adequacy which was found to be 0.804. Value of Barlett's test is considered to be significant when it is less than 0.05 and significance level (p-value) of Barlett's test of sphericity was found to be 0.000 for the dataset being used for this research.

Table 1			
Factor	Item	Correlation	Cronbach Alpha
Leadership	Ability to drive	0.5	0.8
	Create right brand expectations	0.6	
	An advisor	0.6	
Cultural	Understand local business community	0.4	0.7
	Speak local language	0.4	
	Cooperative	0.4	
Competent	Convincing	0.7	0.8
	Enterprising	0.5	
	Passionate	0.5	
Agreeable	Understanding	0.3	0.2
	Assuring	0.1	
	Agreeable	0.1	

Proposed view

This paper uses metaphoric personification of 'brand as a person' approach in line with extant literature (Roper et al., 2002; Silva and Alwi, 2007; Alwi and Silva, 2007) to measure the attitudinal differences that it makes to resellers of international brands. It draws upon the characteristics desired by customers from the literature and based on classic research paradigm proposed by Churchill (1979), it uses qualitative data collected from the field to have deeper insights for identifying the domain of the constructs and items. During qualitative data collection it was found that characteristics desired by resellers of international brands in a person who represents a brand were not similar to those desired by consumers of the brand. A senior manager of a reseller firm explained it as:

> "As regards brand representatives, the person should have a genuine interest in business. It is more of an advisory role if I look at it. May be it is difficult for me to quantify all the characteristics of an advisor but I see brand representative as more of an advisor and therefore, attributes and characteristics that you would look for are attribute of an advisor."

As explained in the quotation, business customers expect a person who represents the brand will explain how the brand will drive partner's business and future growth. As one of the respondents highlighted:

> "The representative of the brand has to have some amount of concern for business partner in all aspects like taking feedback and assuring that you can or cannot get support for marketing and supplies of stocks."

Such characteristics were mentioned by respondents in many ways. Another respondent mentioned it as:

> "I feel that brand representative in the field drive the market. As far as business partners are concerned their role is fulfilment of the demand by ensuring placement of material. I think my job is to make the products available across all the sections of the market with all these

categories of dealers it could be retailer or a corporate reseller. But to drive the market vis a vis competitors depends on the person who represents the brand."

Some of the respondents while discussing the role of a brand representative acknowledged: "I would like to deal with representatives who understand business model of each reseller, understand their individual strengths and try to focus on the strengths of the reseller rather than trying to turn their weakness into their strengths".

While discussing the cultural aspect that business customers look for in a person who represents a brand, one of the respondents mentioned:
"Yes, it is about understanding the territory, understanding the people, because when the representative understands how to manage activities in a particular locality, what is the local culture, how people speak, it helps".

The qualitative data was useful for refining the items for the development of questionnaire. Items were initially chosen based on the extant literature. Items for leadership were chosen from Bradshaw and Brash (2001), Assael and Kamins (1989) and McKenna (2002). The three items that represent the construct of culture were taken from Woorside (2003), Kim and Slocum (2008) and London (1999). Research studies performed by Oakes et al. (1998), London (1999) and Milton-Smith (2006) contributed items for identifying the construct competent. Indicators of agreeable came from Grewal et al. (2001) and Silva and Alwi (2007). Quantitative data was collected from business customers of international brands to empirically test the hypotheses developed and establish the scale using structure equation modeling.

Conclusion

Sustainability is becoming a regular concern for international brands as competition is growing at a much faster rate than anticipated. In business-to-business markets, this trend is reflected in the choices available to customers. The qualities or traits of the person who represents the brand dominate the minds of the business customers and become aftereffects become evident in the purchases made by them. In view of these trends, this research proposes a corporate personality scale for humans who act as figurative representatives of the brand and try to psychologically influence the attitude of customers towards the brand in highly competitive markets. The scale will be useful for international brands and will enable them to fill the gaps posed by representative personality factors that influence purchase decisions of customers in business markets.

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