THE BRAND MULTIPLE: A SOCIAL WORLD PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: This research is a theoretical reflection on brand and branding. It adopts a social world perspective and strives at showing that a brand has no image or identity but rather is multiple. The key idea is that brand is actually performed and doesn't possess any durable ontology.
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Traditional approaches of brands put forward an ontological approach of brands. According to them, a brand is a combination of signs that allows people to distinguish and differentiate one's offer (i.e. based on a taken-for-granted semiotic process). Hence the brand is considered as unproblematic and self-evident: it has an essence that sets a personality (Aaker 1997) and an identity (Keller and Lehmann 2006) that provoke an (identifiable) image (Bird et al. 1970). However, this approach of the brand is now put into question (Thompson et al. 2006). In B2B and industrial marketing, brands are quite neglected and are understudied (Ballantyne and Aitken 2007; Cova 2006). We desire to contribute to a strand of researches considering brands in the complex, relational, and professional contexts of B2B and industrial marketing.

Following a perspective inspired by pragmatic sociology and actor-network theory, this paper proposes a conceptual consideration of brand and branding in B2B and industrial contexts. To this purpose, we are concerned with the brand in its actual contexts and uses. This paper offers a conceptual approach of brand in order to offer a framework to apprehend the "multiplicity" or dialogic nature of brands. We propose to bridge brand-oriented literature with B2B and industrial marketing. Taking into account the developments in branding we wish to offer a discussion on brands and branding (Berthon et al. 2007; Diamond et al. 2009; Thompson et al. 2006).

Current researches underline the complexity of sociocultural reality. Literature proposes various multipliers: social worlds (groups of people sharing perceptions and ways of talking about them, (Strauss 1978)), frames (accepted ways of interpreting and acting, (Goffman 1974)), and perspectives (socially shared of seeing the world, (Shibutani 1955)). These approaches, though different in their perspectives, share the idea that the division between the market and the organization is inaccurate. Rather, they suggest that organizations and markets form tightly coherent systems and constitute an indissoluble duality or dialectic. Subsequently, an ontological approach of brands cannot hold.

Brand in its contexts

A brand is a symbol (Arvidsson 2007). It marks the intellectual property of a firm over its value proposition. In this paragraph we will present the brand as a market device, a managerial device, and an identity device.

Brand as a market device

Traditionally, marketers have apprehended the brand as a market device (Aaker 1991; Ballantyne and Aitken 2007). The management of this device aimed at framing the market: through various strategies, the brand is able to generate loyalty, less sensitivity to price, etc. Hence, brands are very important market devices that allow marketers to "translate" their value propositions into "marketable propositions".

In B2B and industrial context, this approach is often underestimated. Some have called for a shift from brand/organizational perspective to a customer perspective (Cova 2006) in order to grasp the disciplinary dimension of brand and branding.

Branding is thus a way to "discipline" the market: it pre-compute and organize marketing offers and create a differentiating singularity. Consequently, brands allow marketer to generate specific market conditions. Brand should attract consumers' loyalty and increase return on investment. Consequently, many firms strive at creating strong brands in industrial markets in order to increase the value created/delivered by firm.

Nonetheless brands talk to various stakeholders among which the "internal stakeholders" occupy a key position. As a result, brands can be considered as managerial devices.

Brand as a managerial device

Industrial markets are strikingly driven by interpersonal relationships. Consequently, as in other markets (i.e. luxury markets), priority is not given to marketing but rather to product-oriented or industrial processes. This sometimes leads to organizations or intra-organizational teams lacking "marketing perspective".

In order to create, manage, (re)position its brands, firms must integrate a specific framework and adopt an adapted culture. In particular, they can use the brand portfolio management as a way to sort out their organization. For instance, Nexans recently reworked its brand portfolio at a European level. This led to the diffusion of a specific culture in the organization. Numerous other examples could be cited to illustrate the importance of branding as a way to diffuse marketing culture inside the organization. Necessitating various processes, studies, branding allows manager to entail a market-oriented vision in the firm.

A firm wishing to create and/or manage its brand(s) has to construct metrics, commensurability devices, etc. These tools are progressively embedded in daily practices and routines. For example, firms must consider their positioning strategy and justify them through the use of market studies, consulting projects, etc. They are appropriated by collaborators, who integrate them in their rhetoric (Barley 1996). This rhetoric is based on branding that serves as a justification principle (Boltanski and Thevenot 1991). For this reason branding is a process allowing the diffusion of a marketing culture. Cf. Nexans case.

The brand can be considered as a boundary object (Star and Griesemer 1989), that is they plastic enough to adapt to the local needs and interests of the several social worlds employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites. Thus a brand is multiple; what we call the brand multiple.

Brand as an identity device

Most organizations are not as unitary as they appear. Contrary to a harmonious whole, organizations are fragmented social groupings. Obviously they share some sort of commonalities but the latter shouldn't mask the great heterogeneity that exist in any organization (Bruni 2005; Wenger 1998). This fragmentation is all the more noticeable in B2B and industrial organizations that they are usually constituted by various communities of practice. Crespin-Mazet and Sitz (2008) tackled branding as an identity-management tool. They showed that Spie Batignolles is constituted of diverse groups that share specific idiocultures, languages, practices, spaces, etc. These groups are communities of practice (Wenger 2000). These communities of practice are groups coexisting inside the organization. A great challenge for managers is to coordinate and manage the communities of practice (Bechky 2003; Cohendet and Diani 2003; Wenger 1998).

Kärreman (2008) showed how consulting firms use branding as a mean to manage meaning throughout the organization. These firms make use of brands to amalgamate people around a common symbol. This strategy is not similar to internal communication. Rather it is an identity-management strategy aiming at constructing an identity symbol. As such, brands constitute boundary-objects that render possible the unity of diverse communities of practice. In rallying around the brand, the communities of practice break free from competing loyalties and bring about an identity alignment of the firm. Organizational cohesion structures itself through the interplay between brands, managerial discourses, and interorganizational networks. In this respect, management literature on organization and/or collective identity is quite pertinent (He and Balmer 2007; Pratt and Rafaeli 1997). Brand is not confused with the firm. Thus collaborators can appropriate the brand according to their need. As such, brands are identity-resources.

Identity resources constitute a toolkit managers can use in order to coordinate various communities of practice and transform them into partners while keeping the specificities of each group (Abrams et al. 2005; Ashforth 1998).

The organizing power of the brand is embedded in specific communities of practice and in the cultural and identity discourses they evoke. Each community of practice seize the brand in its own way. This allows a co-orientation of attention without coercion (Ansell 1997). Hence, the brand is an identity symbol allowing managers to align the heterogeneous actions of the various communities of practice coexisting in an organization.

However, as researches show us, communities of practice are stretched across firms (Bechky 2003; Cooren et al. 2007; Kärreman and Rylander 2008; Peltonen 2007). Put simply, electricians share a common work-culture even if they don't belong to the same organization. In this perspective brands are identity symbols capable to gather a variety of communities of practice across organizations. The plasticity of the social worlds is framed by branding strategies and managers should take more often into account branding as a means to coordinate in the same time the intra-organizational networks and the networks spanning across organizations.

Discussion

The brand multiple is not fragmented. It has local characters, performed and/or enacted according to local, specific needs or interests of actors. Accordingly, marketers should adopt a multiple perspective on brands (Berthon et al. 2007) and apprehend them as situated plurivocal symbol (Diamond et al. 2009). The brand is plastic enough to adapt to different settings and practice communities. Borrowing Latour's ideas, we consider the brand as a "mutable mobile" (Czarniawska 2004; Latour 1987 [1989]) that adapts and is adapted (De Laet and Mol 2000). The B2B brand "talks" to various stakeholders: the various segments of clients, the authorities, the numerous communities of practice inside the organization, etc. In this respect brands can be considered as abstract symbols that provide the basis for cohesion: in gathering around the brand, the actors break free from misunderstandings or divergent interests (Wenger 2000).

The brand multiple affects actors through its constitutive contribution to representations and practices (De Laet and Mol 2000). To understand the power and importance of a brand, marketers must apprehend its 'fluidity': a brand has a multivocal identity translating actors' interests, hence becoming 'obligatory point of passage' (Callon 1986). That is, rather than examining the 'content' of the brand, marketers should focus on the flexible boundaries of the brand. As the 'ad-hoc categories' revealed by Barsalou (1983), the brand is not self-evident, nor clear-cut. Instead, it can be considered as adaptation and variants. However, this fluidity is not simply a matter of interpretation (Eco 1979 [1985]), it is the nature of the brand multiple: it is inherently multivocal.

The consequences for branding are noteworthy. First, the positioning of a brand should take into account this processual and dialogical nature of this symbol. In this regard, marketers must consider positioning strate*gies*, specific to different actors. The brand, as a fluid device, could be used as boundary object to furnish a common ground for actors belonging to various social worlds. Second, the success of a brand depends on its ability to mobilize heterogeneous actors. Hence, the actors consider not the intrinsic qualities of the brand but rather its ability to 'interest' actors. Third, each actor grabbing the brand for special reasons and act as a smuggler or translator (Serres 1974; Serres 1979). This translation explains why the brand permanently changes: it is transformed, appropriated, and re-semantized according to indexical needs. This fluid nature of the brand implicates that it depends on the 'cultural frames' the actors mobilize.

If marketers no longer presume "brands" to be universal in a market, complexification follows. Brands are multiple. This doesn't imply their fragmentation. Although brands come in different versions, these are partially connected. The association of a diversity of objects under a single name requires various modes of coordination between heterogeneous actors.

Brands have different meanings in different social worlds but their structure is common enough to more than one world to make them recognizable. So brands are effective means of translation and marketing boundary-object (Griesemer and Gerson 1993). The creation and management of boundary objects is a key process in developing and maintaining coherence across intersecting social worlds and communities (Bechky 2003). In this respect, it is important, especially in industrial

marketing, to take into account the fact that the brand is multiple. Marketers and managers must recognize the intricacies of the brand and to acknowledge its fluidity.

By showing the plurality, the agency, and the performative role of brand(ing), this paper wishes to contribute in the recent turn in marketing to transform what it means to *do* marketing (Azimont and Araujo 2007; Kjellberg and Hegelsson 2006; Kjellberg and Helgesson 2007). Marketers are not just exploiting resources and market positions but also cultural entrepreneurs (Lawrence and Phillips 2004; Rao 2009) striving at "making", "constructing", "shaping", or "framing" the market with the use various devices. Among these devices, we hope to have shown that brands play an important role.

Marketing is a set of displinary practices of the market (Cochoy 1999) but also of the organization itself. To the extent that marketing *do* things, it relies on symbols, especially the brand. The brand, and all the (branding) processes involved, provides the basis for organizational coherence. Hence, the brand is a boundary-object that makes possible the translation of one's language

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