CORPORATE BRANDING IN A MICRO-SIZED INDUSTRIAL SERVICE COMPANY

ABSTRACT

Purpose - The purpose of this paper is to explore in detail the internal and external corporate branding activities of micro-sized industrial business services companies.

Design/methodology/approach - An abductive research approach and a case study method were used. Data was gathered with thematic interviews from three sources, a case company, its distributors, and its end customers.

Findings - A model for building a corporate brand identity and image in a micro-sized industrial business services company was formed. Key activities, including defining company values and the business idea, designing, managing and stabilising the service process, utilising holistic corporate communications, networking as well as activating and retaining stakeholders and utilising feedback, for building a corporate brand were identified.

Research limitations/implications – Because the importance of the internal branding can be presumed to rise with personnel, the repeatability of this study is weakened by the case organization being a micro company. Several suggestions for future research can be made based on this study: the causality of the presented model's connections with quantitative methods, the network branding and service company brand hierarchies.

Practical implications - This paper shows how a micro company can build its brand, without the need of extra resources. Moreover, it suggests ways of utilizing external resources, by exploring how the company's stakeholders can participate in the branding process.

Originality/value- This study expands the service branding literature to industrial services micro companies by identifying activities that can be utilised by them.

Keywords Corporate branding, business-to-business, stakeholders, networking

INTRODUCTION

The strong growth of the service sector (Mitchell 1998) and the intensified competition resulting from it (Berry 2000; de Chernatony & McDonald 2007, 210) as well as the shortening of the service life cycle and the ease of copying services have directed the attention of both researchers and practitioners to the sustainable competitive advantage of branding (King 1991). Yet the understanding of branding services companies has not kept up with the growth of the industrial service sector (Davis, Golicic & Marquardt 2008) and service brands have generally been less successful than product brands (McDonald, de Chernatony & Harris 2001; de Chernatony & Segal-Horn 2003). The weak success is most likely a result of lacking knowledge in branding in this specific context, which contributes to a vain application of product branding policies (King 1991, 265; de Chernatony, Drury & Segal-Horn 2003).

Research on branding industrial services companies has been very limited (Davis *et al.* 2008) partly because B2B transactions have been considered purely rational and thus the effect of brands to be minimal (Mudambi, Doyle & Wong 1997, 84; Ballantyne & Aitken 2007). However, several studies (e.g. Lynch & de Chernatony 2004; Lynch & de Chernatony 2007; Kotler & Pfoertsch 2007) have shown that the influence of emotional and intangible factors is

not limited to consumer markets. In fact, professional buyers who consider the purchase decision important and risky as well as those that prefer long-term relationships and partnering are receptive to branding (Mudambi 2002).

Branding industrial services organizations requires a special approach. Firstly, the selection of a service provider is a strategic choice (e.g. Dibb & Simkin 1993; Berry 2000; Mudambi 2002). Secondly, the interaction between the buyer and the industrial service provider is highly complex and occurs over a long period of time (de Chernatony & Segal-Horn 2003; de Chernatony *et al.* 2003). Finally, King (1991) and Berry (2000) suggests that instead of service branding, corporate branding is more suitable branding strategy for services companies, since it is challenging to differentiate services without physical differences (Ferguson 1996). In corporate branding the whole firm is mobilised to participate in branding and the corporate brand is used to influence not only customers, but also other stakeholder groups (de Chernatony & Harris 2000; Schultz, Antorini & Csaba 2005, 12). Thus, although contradicting views have been presented (e.g. Krishnan & Hartline 2001), research strongly supports the particularities of branding industrial services companies with corporate branding strategy (see Webster 1988; Mitra, Reiss & Capella 1999; Webster & Keller 2004; Davis *et al.* 2008). Thus, corporate and company branding in this study refer to distinguishing the company from others by defining, creating, and maintaining such a company identity and image (i.e. brand awareness and associations) that its stakeholders value. Company branding process consists of activities performed by the company and/or its stakeholders. A company branding activity defines, creates or maintains the company identity and/or the image in the eyes of the internal and external stakeholders.

Although industrial services firms are often small or micro (Sveiby 1990, 37), they operate in a competitive environment characterised by dynamic market trends (Abimbola 2001), where the development of a competitive advantage is crucial (Scarborough & Zimmerer 1996, 24). The importance of the corporate brand as a source of competitive advantage is accentuated in any economic downturn, which usually afflicts challenges most of all on SME's (Lindberg-Repo, Mehra, Gupta, Dube, Kaul 2009, 6). However, the vast majority of branding literature takes a view of large corporations and its applicability on micro and small firms is questionable (Chaston 1997; Berthon, Ewing & Napoli 2008). The special characteristics of micro and small firms, such as scarce resources in terms of finances and staff, require context related branding research that results in creative and affordable branding (Mowle & Merrilees 2005; Wong & Merrilees 2005; Ojasalo, Nätti, Olkkonen 2008).

Service branding studies often stress the importance of internal aspects of branding. Indeed, employee branding is effective when employees internalize the desired brand image and are motivated and empowered to project that to customers and other stakeholders (Miles and Mangold 2004, 2005; Henkel, Tomczak, Heitmann & Herrmann 2007). However, employee branding becomes ineffective, if the brand is not based on reality (Cushen 2009). In a micro firm, employing up to nine persons, internal branding or identity building is not as challenging as reaching external stakeholders and building a corporate image. Thus, the feasibility of existing research on branding in the services sector to micro companies is limited. To fill the gap, this study focuses on understanding *the activities of branding a micro-sized industrial services company*.

The rest of this article is organized as follows. First, the article models theoretically the branding activities in micro organizations. The literary review will combine research on corporate branding, branding in the service sector, branding in the B2B markets and SME

branding with SME marketing and industrial services marketing studies in order to map out the relevant contextual characteristics. After presenting the methodology used in the empirical part, the study introduces the analysis and findings of the case study and also suggests managerial guidelines. The article concludes with avenues for further research.

THEORETICAL MODEL OF BRANDING IN A MICRO INDUSTRIAL SERVICES COMPANY

Before modelling the branding activities, we outline the background based from which the model stems from. Firstly, the model outlines the branding activities when applying a corporate branding strategy. Corporate branding is a common branding strategy both in B2B (Roberts & Merrilees 2007; Kotler, Pfoertsch & Michi 2006, 80) and service companies (McDonald *et al.* 2001; de Chernatony 2006, 31). In industrial services, the company itself and its processes and personnel, not the services, are considered value adding factors (Glazer 2000, 411). In addition, customers view the company as an entity due to the intangibility of services and the central role of the service experience in creating value (Berry 2000). B2B companies' offerings include a vast spectrum of different, complicated and above all tailored solutions for heterogeneous buyers (see e.g., Kotler & Pfoertsch 2006, 80). Hence, utilising a product branding strategy can be very challenging (Kotler & Pfoertsch 2006, 80) also from the financial point of view (Ojasalo *et al.* 2008). Furthermore, company branding offers micro companies synergy advantages as it enables reaching multiple stakeholders instead of only buyers (McDonald *et al.* 2001; de Chernatony 2006, 31; Merrilees 2007).

Secondly, the model stresses the service processes as integral activities in services company branding. In previous research on corporate branding in the consumer services sector, a large number of communication and contact points, the importance of relationships, internal branding and enrolling employees in branding as well as the experiential aspect have been stressed (Berry 2000; McDonald *et al.* 2001; Roberts & Merrilees 2007). In a service company setting, brand associations have been found to be more significant than brand awareness also in B2B contexts (Berry 2000; Davis *et al.* 2008). Service experience is the primary source of brand associations and a service process the most significant source of brand differentiation (Berry 2000). Thus, in services the significance of the service experience can be considered more important than marketing communications often underlined by branding literature (McDonald *et al.* 2001; de Chernatony 2006, 32; Grönroos 2007, 335).

Thirdly, the model acknowledges the dynamic nature of services and therefore branding. Industrial service processes, with considerable customer participation, do not offer a standardised basis for corporate branding and thus, the brand is changing and evolving (Grönroos 2007, 330). In addition, in industrial services customer expectations are often complex, fuzzy and unclear making them more difficult to be fulfilled (Ojasalo 2001; Axelsson & Wynstra 2002, 33). Due to the variety, complexity and inconsistency of the service creation process, producing brand equity is challenging in the service sector (Berry 2000; De Chernatony & Segal-Horn 2003).

Fourthly, the model takes into consideration the nature of micro-sized enterprises. Due to scarce resources micro companies need to find creative, affordable and targeted ways of branding (Krake 2005; Ojasalo *et al.* 2008). B2B micro firms serve narrow customer segments and therefore can tailor affordable targeted messages (Kuhn, Alpert & Pope 2008; Wong & Merrilees 2005; Ojasalo *et al.* 2008). They can demonstrate their core competence directly to customers and other stakeholders by personal selling and face-to-face

communications (Ojasalo *et al*. 2008). Flexibility and the ability to react quickly to stakeholder signals are micro firms' strengths in marketing (e.g. Scarborough & Zimmerer 1996, 245–250) and the model will presume that this applies also to branding.

In the following, the branding activities are discussed in detail based on the existing literature.

Defining company values

Our framework starts with internal activities through which company identity is developed. Such activities are performed by the owners and employees of the micro company and include activities to define the values of the company and at times, updating the value base. Statements regarding identity are often expressed as values (Schultz 2005, 44). Company values can be a source of sustainable competitive advantage as they, unlike services and their features, are difficult to copy (de Chernatony, Harris & Dall'Olmo Riley 2000). A values approach to branding enables the company to develop brand based connections with multiple stakeholders (Roper & Davies 2007). When customer participation is considerable and the purchase decision complex, the base for building the company brand shifts from concrete service benefits to more abstracts and immaterial associations (Beverland, Napoli & Yakimova 2007), such as values.

Defining values and updating the value base involves finding the right balance between continuity and change, which is a precondition for building and sustaining a strong company brand (de Chernatony, Drury & Segal-Horn 2004). In a micro industrial services firm, values are intertwined with the world view, beliefs and experiences of the founder (Ind 1997, 36; Ciulla 1999; Wickham 2004; Rode & Vallaster 2005) and the employees, who demonstrate them through their activities (Miles & Mangold 2004; Morsing 2006; Berry 2000; de Chernatony, Drury & Segal-Horn 2004; Henkel et al. 2007; de Chernatony & Drury 2008).

Designing and managing the service process

When looking at the activities that create corporate image, i.e. brand awareness and associations for external stakeholders, the activities of owners and employees as well as customers in co-producing the service are in focus. Customer associations are to a high degree influenced by service encounters and interaction with employees and the service processes are also the main source of company brand differentiation (de Chernatony & Segal-Horn 2003). Thus, maintaining positive brand contacts with customers by designing and managing the service process enables the development of a company image (Johnson & Zinkhan 1991; Grönroos 2007, 336).

The degree of customer participation in the service production process determines to a great extent how the customer evaluates the company brand (McDonald *et al.* 2001). Customers co-produce service quality and value (Martin, Horne & Chang 2001; Brodie, Glynn, & Little 2006), thus effecting their own evaluation of the brand (McDonald *et al.* 2001). When a buyer is made aware of its role in the service process and it is willing and able to perform its part, the brand can be strengthened (Grace & O'Cass 2005). By taking into consideration the customer experience's functional (end result), technical (process) and emotional (behaviour, values) dimension the service process can be managed as a whole (Liljander & Strandvik 1997; Seiders, Voss, Grewark & Godfrey 2005; Klaus & Maklan 2007). The technical dimension of the customer experience is emphasised more than the functional dimension in

industrial services (Reid 2008), which places designing and managing the service process and company practises as well as the quality of the relationship at the heart of branding (Johnson & Zinkhan 1991; McDonald *et al.* 2001; Grönroos 2007, 335).

Holistic company communications

Communications is a pivotal branding activity contributing to the corporate image (see e.g. Balmer 1995, 189; Arora & Stoner 1996; Harris & de Chernatony 2001). Holistic and integrated company communications (Schultz & Barnes 1999, 45; Balmer & Greyser 2006; Bendixen, Bukasa & Abratt 2004) is based on the view that messages about company are mediated to different stakeholders, not only through planned and controlled communications, but through all information bearing direct or indirect contact with the company (Schultz & Barnes 1999, 46–47; Grönroos 2007, 304). A coherent brand image can develop, when messages transmitted within the organization clearly convey the organization's mission, values, and desired brand image as well as the behaviours and attitudes the organization deems important and expects from employees (Miles & Mangold 2004, Miles & Mangold 2005). Miles & Mangold (2004) stress the importance of proactively designing, and delivering frequently and consistently the messages through all message channels.

Balmer and Gray (2000) identify three different levels of holistic communications: primary, secondary and tertiary communications. Primary communications consists of the messages sent through service performance, employee and management behaviour as well as company policies (Balmer 2001, 310; Grönroos 2007, 307). In industrial services personal sales is highly important (Kotler *et al.* 2006, 32; Reid 2008). Secondary communications include planned and controlled communications (van Riel 1995, 10–11; Balmer 2001, 310; Grönroos 2007, 307) and symbolism encompassing the visual identity (e.g. corporate name, logo, colour palette and slogan) (van den Bosch, de Jong & Elving 2005; Kapferer 2005, 52) as well as physical hints such as office spaces (LeBlanc & Nguyen 1996; Nguyen & Leblanc 2002). Tertiary communications consist of word-of-mouth between a company's stakeholders (van Riel 1995, 10–11; Balmer 2001, 310 Grönroos 2007, 306–307), the actions of people participating in the service simultaneously, and the publicity the company receives (Grönroos 2007, 306–307). The three levels of communications reach to some extent overlapping stakeholders (Hatch & Schultz 2000, 19; Gregory 2007) and communication is therefore unavoidably somewhat transparent (Einwiller & Will 2002). Thus, a holistic and integrated approach enables building a consistent company brand (van Riel 1995, 19; de Chernatony & Segal-Horn 2003; Knox & Bickerton 2003).

Schultz and de Chernatony (2002) see a shift taking place from controlling communications to listening and understanding the differing view points of a company's stakeholders (see also Schultz & Barnes 1999, 64; Fombrun & Rindova 2000, 93). For an industrial services micro firm stimulating word-of-mouth (Johnson, Zinkhan & Ayala 1998; Johnson & Zinkhan 1991; Grace & O'Cass 2002) and effectively managing it (Mitra *et al.* 1999) can overshadow secondary communications due to the company's special characteristics. First, a micro-sized company's resources are too limited for large scale marketing communications (Wong & Merrilees 2005; Ojasalo *et al.* 2008). Second, industrial service companies rarely utilise formal marketing communication in their branding (Andriopoulos & Gotsi 2000), because they do not consider it to be in line with their identity often based on competence and credibility (Kotler *et al.* 2006, 5). Third, when great risk, in regards to outcome and expense is involved in the purchase decision, such as in industrial services (van Doren *et al.* 1985;

Mitra *et al.* 1999), customers actively search for information through word-of-mouth (Johnson *et al.* 1998; Bansal & Voyer 2000), as they consider it to be more credible than marketing communications (Grönroos 2007, 306). Fourth, for B2B companies reaching relevant and narrow target segments is adequate and cost-effective, mass communications is redundant (Ojasalo *et al.* 2008).

Networking

Various network activities, such as cooperation with other companies, forming brand alliances and co-branding are significant strategic opportunities for micro companies with scarce resources in developing brand awareness and raising brand associations (Ostgaard & Birley 1996; Wincent 2005). Through cooperation corporate brand image and identity can be transferred from a stronger corporate brand to a weaker one (James 2005; Uggla 2006; Bengtsson & Servais 2005), strengthening the company brand, lessening its limitations and widening its value base (Aaker 2002, 301; McDonald *et al.* 2001).

In addition to the company itself, service experiences can be co-branded by co-producing them with other companies (Morgan, Deeter-Schmelz & Moberg 2007). Complementing resources assist in responding to customers' changing demands over a longer period of time and sustaining corporate brand relevance (see Morgan 2004). In order to avoid inconsistencies in the brand, internal branding can be utilised in the service co-production network by preparing and motivating distributors and other network partners to actively take part in enacting the brand (Grönroos 2007, 330, 337; Bucklin and Sengupta 1993).

In industrial services personal relationships have a key role in company branding (Davis *et al.* 2008). Their significance is emphasised in newly established companies, where the owner-manager's own credibility can be used to lessen stakeholders' experienced risk (Merrilees 2007), since the company has not yet been able to contribute to its image through its service performance.

Since industrial customers' take part in the co-production of the service, they can even be considered as partial employees (Bitner, Faranda & Hubbert, 1997; Halbesleben & Buckley 2004). Customers can be utilised as ambassadors for the corporate brand through informal stimulation (Johnson & Zinkhan 1991; Kotler *et al.* 2006, 45), management of word-of-mouth (Mitra *et al.* 1999) and through the use of references (Salminen & Möller 2006; Ojasalo *et al.* 2008). Likewise, customer selection can be used to develop the brand through customer associations, which have a spill-over effect on the corporate brand image (Keller 2000) and through challenging projects that add to the knowledge equity of the company (Ojasalo 2002).

Activating and retaining stakeholders and utilising feedback

Activating and retaining stakeholders as well as utilising feedback are central activities that enable the development of both corporate identity and image, although remain less studied in branding literature (see e.g. Olins 2000; Balmer & Greyser 2003). However, Gregory (2007) stresses that effective brand building is interactive, stakeholders being not passive targets but also active partakers. Thus, activating stakeholders to interact with the company can be utilised in developing, sustaining and strengthening the company brand (Dall'Olmo Riley & de Chernatony 2000; Brodie *et al.* 2006; Gregory 2007). Gregory (2007) introduces a concept

of negotiated brand, which is constantly evolving yet consistent in the long run due to a relatively unchanging company value base.

To sum up, the main activities that influence company brand can be divided into activities producing corporate identity (defining values) and activities producing corporate image (service processes, communications, networking and stakeholder activities). The activities may also influence each other, as well as both the elements of company brand, although the theoretical discussion so far has remained silent of their interconnections. Since the theoretical model presented above lacks empirical grounding, the following sections contextualise the model with qualitative data.

QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY

This study utilises an abductive research logic, which allows for theory and empirical data to be in constant interplay (Kovács & Spens 2005). Qualitative research methods are used, because the research subject has received little attention in previous studies (Shaw 1999). Thus, the aim is to develop theory on branding a micro industrial services company. Therefore, this study focuses on a rich description of the phenomenon, which enables us to interpret meaningful and complex relationships (Kvale 1996, 11). With qualitative research methods we can address the micro organization as an entity as well as to develop close contacts between researchers and the targets of the study; this is a precondition for knowledge and theory creation (Stake 1995, 37; Shaw 1999).

The case study method was chosen since it applies well to the abductive research logic and enables a researcher to formulate a holistic and meaningful view of the complex research phenomenon (Yin 2003, 2; Kovács & Spens 2005), when little is known about it (Easton 1995, 475) as is the case here. We limited the research to a single revelatory case that allows the uncovering of a previously inaccessible phenomenon (see Yin 2003, 39–40, 42). The chosen case was partly intrinsic and partly instrumental; the case company and its situation were interesting in itself, but by studying the case this study also strives for analytical generalizability (Yin 2003, 10; Stake 2005, 450–451).

As business consultancy is a traditional form of industrial services, the case company was chosen from that field. Tietoneuvos Ltd is a one-man consultancy company founded in 1985, offering innovation and management consulting as well as couching services to employees, middle and top management as well as to local business support service organizations. Thus the corporate buyer, user and the one that pays for the services are not necessarily one and the same (i.e. the support service organization buys consultancy services as a part of their own services to new entrepreneurs). Recently, Tietoneuvos had moved from one geographical market area to another within Finland, and therefore had no clientele in the new area. Hence, the firm was in a situation where it needed to develop both company brand awareness and image for new stakeholders. The owner-manager was working only part-time for his company, but had long-term plans to hand it over to his sons.

The primary data of the study was gathered with thematic interviews to enable relatively unrestricted interaction between a researcher and interviewees. Thus, discussions are driven by what the respondents feel is important yet kept within the framework of the study with the help of the pre-formulated themes (see O'Donnell & Cummins 1999; Yin 2003, 86). Allowing new, yet relevant issues to emerge from the data in this way is central in abductive research (Kovács & Spens 2005). The interview themes were formed based on the research

questions and our theoretical pre-understanding. Following a common practice in abductive research, non-theoretical interview questions were posed to gather data on the interviewees' terms and to avoid misinterpretations affecting the research (Ali & Birley 1999).

Previous studies have noted incongruities and differences in internal and external perceptions concerning company brands and branding (see e.g. Davies & Chun 2002), which has been verified in the B2B service context (see Davis, Golicic & Marquardt 2008). Thus, data was gathered from both seller's and buyer's perspectives, as seen in Table 1, to reflect the multiple realities of the social world and to try to avoid the trap of over-simplified models or answers (see Perren & Ram 2004). In addition to the owner-manager, the case company's two former customers' owner-managers (from the previous market area), two potential customers' owner-managers and three potential distributor organizations' (i.e. regional business support service organizations) representatives from the new market area were interviewed. The interview data thus consists of nine personal interviews.

Table .1 Thematic interviews.

Company type	Title of interviewee	Duration
Case company	Owner-Manager (two interviews)	1 h 9 min
		1 h 35 min
Former customer on previous market area (1)	CEO	26 min
Former customer on previous market area (2)	CEO	35 min
Potential end customer on new market area (1)	CEO	30 min
Potential end customer on new market area (2)	CEO	38 min
Distributor organization (1)	Chief of Consulting, Head of Section	55 min
Distributor organization (2)	V.P.	1 h 9 min
Distributor organization (3)	CEO	40 min

Secondary data was gathered from the case company with open interviews, conversations, negotiations and participatory observation throughout the two-year research process. In addition, non-interactive data, documents from the case company, was gathered. Hill, McGowan and Drummond (1999) state that research concerning micro organizations requires versatile utilisation of different available methods throughout the research process. Data gathering methods thus alternated to fit the arisen issues (see Eisenhardt 1989; Hill *et al*. 1999).

Before conducting the interviews, m*ethods for analysing* the data were carefully considered, so that they could be effectively used. As is typical for qualitative research (Stake 1995, 9), data was analysed partly simultaneously with gathering data, transcribing interviews, interpreting them and reporting on them. However, a more intensive analysis followed the primary data gathering phase (O'Donnell & Cummins 1999). Firstly, the data was organized by transcribing it word for word and importing it to QSR NVivo8. Thereafter, the data was restructured by thematic coding (see e.g. Miles and Huberman 1994), as a first step of the analysis. The formulated themes were based on the interview themes, but new issues within themes and new connections between themes arose from the data. The coding was further clarified by bringing more central themes and activities to the front. Issues related to the research problem that arose from several interviews or on which special stress was placed on by one or more interviewee were considered relevant. Data was categorised into smaller sections at first, after which a new entity, which describes the research phenomenon from a novel theoretical view point, was formed.

BRANDING ACTIVITIES IN THE CAS E COMPANY

Defining company values and the business idea

Company values form the basis for operations in the company and they are closely connected with the owner-managers personal identity and history. The values are stated in the company's internal documents. To external stakeholders the values are reflected in preliminary discussions and, most importantly, in the way the company performs its operations. Interaction with customers has modified the values as they are connected to maintaining long-term relationships and describe customer benefits. Industrial services are intensively customer-oriented and this is reflected in the company's values.

Defining the business idea arose from the data as a new activity in company branding. In the case company, the brand is continuously honed based on the operational environment by defining and redefining the business idea. The flexibility of the business idea has enabled transferring business activities from one market area to another as well as making internal changes. Future recruitment is planned to happen within the owner-managers family members and the individual knowledge equities to require reformulation of the business idea. Redefinition of the business idea is seen as an inexpensive way of developing the company brand.

Currently, the association that both the owner-manager and the company's former customers connect with Tietoneuvos is "its owner's creative hobby". Based on this (and the fact that transferring business activities from one area to another was motivated by life-style choices not business related drivers), the case company represents a life-style business (see e.g., Chaston 2008). The external stakeholders see the distinction between the image of life-style business and business highly relevant and clear; a life-style company does not have a brand image that is separate from its owner's occupation (in this case a teacher in a polytechnic). The customers expect a consultant to provide them with up-to-date knowledge from their own field. However, in this case, the teacher occupation did not support the company's brand image perceived by the customers. However, it confirms that external stakeholders view the owner of a micro firm and his/her firm largely as a single entity.

Designing, managing and stabilising the service process

Tietoneuvos has defined a service process model, which is then implemented in a flexible manner allowing the services produced to be tailored to fit different customer needs. This combination of *stabilised service processes and flexible and tailored services* are means of differentiating Tietoneuvos from other consulting companies offering fixed service packages. It balances the personalisation of the company brand and the 'co-branding' of the consultant and the company. Through process stabilisation the personal knowledge equity of the owner-manager, the services and the methods used to produce them are made tradable.

From a customer view point, the definition of the service processes influences the company's brand image, as it helps to grasp the service offering and to set and monitor objectives of the services. The customer company's management making the purchasing decisions is the most important stakeholder for an industrial service company. This poses a challenge for raising brand associations, since the management does not necessarily participate in the actual service process. However, if something goes wrong, the management will be made aware of it, thus influencing the brand associations. Nevertheless, the applicability of the service into

the practice of the customer company is a significant source of brand associations for management. Thus, the end-result of the service can be considered to be at least equally important as the service process itself.

For the middlemen (the business support services), however, process stabilisation did not offer added value, since their core competence consists of forming stabilised service packages. Personalisation of the brand on the other hand can be utilised in marketing industrial services to the middlemen, as they are first and foremost looking for consultants with the right characteristics and capabilities to cooperate with them in offering services to their own customers.

Utilising holistic corporate communications

As Tietoneuvos is a one-man company, we focus on external communications. It was found that *primary communications* encompassing the consult's disposition and behaviour are connected with brand associations. The owner-manager communicates company values to stakeholders through his everyday interaction with them. In addition, service performance was found to be connected with brand associations. It is evaluated by the applicability of the service into practice.

Because customers who purchase industrial services have very heterogeneous needs, they value customer specific communication regarding *secondary communications*. Consequently, it is challenging to raise awareness and brand associations with mass communications. Also, the case company cannot afford massive marketing campaigns and it is interested in targeting only narrow segments as it cannot serve multiple customers at the same time.

Several communication channels are utilised in order to strengthen the sent message. Both the brand identity and stakeholder feedback were found to be connected to selecting communication mediates. The case company tries to communicate through mediates that it has found stakeholders to be most receptive to. Yet, the owner-manager's strong sense of the company's identity has hindered him from setting up for example web pages. The owner-manager feels that personal contact is the key to doing business in industrial services.

Symbolism was found to be connected with the company brand image especially when the stakeholders have no previous experience of the company. The case company considers the protected company name an important and successful part of the company brand. As previous theory has stated (see Ojasalo *et al*. 2008) is characteristic to micro companies, it has evaluated this through indirect competitor feedback (how many competitors have tried to use the name), not customer feedback.

The case company's logo, colour palette, business card and other material were all designed by an advertising agency in 1995. The case company's slogan "Innovation Knowledge for Winners", which reflects the company's values, describes the case company's core competence and profiles the customers, has also remained the same since 1995. The company has in this way created a fairly united although currently outdated visual image. The brochure and note paper will be updated only if business picks up in the new market area. As the company stresses innovativity in its business, it can be concluded that relevance is more important than continuity for its company brand. Thus, an outdated visual image does not support the aspired company brand image.

In addition to not having web pages, the case company does not have office spaces. As is typical to micro-sized consultancy companies, fixed costs are minimised and the service is often performed in the customers' premises. Because concrete company brand hints are few, the significance of the owner-manager as a source of brand associations is emphasised. This is in contradiction with the company's objective of broadening the brand from the owner-manager to the company.

Tietoneuvos did no systematically monitor *tertiary communications,* such as word-of-mouth, since it was felt to be difficult with scarce resources. The owner-manager's personal contacts are the most utilised form of monitoring. For both end customers and distributor organizations conversations with colleagues and other acquaintances was found to be the most central way of forming a brand image of a company, when they do not have previous experiences of the company.

It was found that the credibility and the validity of a company can be developed through positive publicity. The case company has tried to target magazines relevant to its customers in order to reach them effectively. From the customer point of view it was found that if an article on a consulting company takes up a theme that is relevant to the customers' own business, the customer can associate competence to the industrial services company's image.

Networking

The case company *utilises its* loosely coupled service *network* as well as the network that consists of relationships with regional business support service organizations, entrepreneurs associations, research and education organizations and other SME's in branding the company. With the lack of company brand awareness, the owner-manager has used his personal social networks as an entry strategy to different networks in the new market area.

The case company uses unofficial co-branding with distributor organizations (business support service organizations). When co-producing services with them, the owner-manager simultaneously represents his company aiming to transfer the established positive image from the distribution company to his consultancy company. Another aim is to create brand awareness within the distribution organizations' customer networks. The distributor organizations have the resources to market the services much more efficiently than the consultancy company can. Moreover, sometimes the regional business support service organization (distributor) acts as an integrator and for example arranges the location for the consulting sessions, provides the layout for the presentation materials, and has its own personnel present at the sessions. Thus, co-branding is also symbolic; the visual image and physical hints.

Networking with various actors is also used in differentiating the company brand. The distributor organizations have also in some cases partly financed the service production, which has lowered the customer companies' threshold to utilise the services of Tietoneuvos. The case company's potential customers in many cases have an established relationship with a distributor. The trust between the two actors aids in mediating the start of the relationship between the case company and the customers.

The case company has attempted to both influence the company associations of the brand and to position it in the new market by networking with high-tech companies. This has been a way to transfer the well-known network actor's corporate image to the case company's image

and to associate the company to technology businesses, the case company's main target customer industry in its new operational area. These unofficial co-branding activities include joint research projects with technology companies and presenting the companies' names and logos together in different seminar materials.

By utilising its own service networks, the case company has tried to respond to customers' multiple needs over a long period of time and to secure a continuous service process in order to raise positive associations of the company. From the case company and the distributor organization point of view, it was found that by focusing on the company's core competence, and delegating other customer requirements to proficient companies, the consultancy company can raise associations of credibility and competence.

Internal branding is utilised *in the knowledge network*, as a way of minimising the risks involved in co-branding, such as the external professionals' possible selfish promotion of own interests and occurrence of brand inconsistencies. The internal branding is managed by the distributor organizations. The case company is more of a target of internal branding than an orchestrator of it. In internal branding the distributor organizations pay attention to the compatibleness of business practices, values and visual images. The distributor organizations practice internal branding by leading by example and by bringing up their expectations in the discussions with the consultancy company.

The transfer of company brand identity was not found to be relevant in the industrial services setting. The distributor organizations do not attempt to affect the value base of the consultancy companies, because they prefer to maintain a loose network and believe that the consultancy company's value base has developed over a long period of time to be a relatively inseparable part of the company. Compatibility of the companies is to a great extent estimated already before beginning cooperation.

Customer references that can be acquired either directly from the consultancy company, or more importantly through the unofficial networks of the potential distributor organization or end customer influenced the stakeholder's company brand awareness and brand associations. The consultancy company utilises references in positioning the company brand and profiling the service users. Customer companies enquire references especially when company brand awareness of potential consultancy service providers is low. By assessing the quality and quantity of the clientele, buyers evaluate the consultancy company's capabilities and continuity of its operations.

Stakeholder activation, retention and utilisation of feedback

Stakeholder activation is considered important yet challenging by the case company. Constant liaising and presentation of mutual goals is used as way to activate stakeholders. However, a weak company image hinders these efforts.

Tietoneuvos collects feedback from customers constantly during the service process and modifies its process accordingly. *Distributor organizations* collect feedback at the end of the service and then discuss it with the consult if the consult wishes to do so. Consultancy companies cannot rely on only one distributor organization in order to practice profitable business operations. Despite this, distributor organizations require loyalty and commitment from consultancy companies. They stressed for example the importance of prioritisation and

adhering to set timetables as well as declining commissions from other distributor organizations if there is a conflict of interest.

On the other hand, the case company, end customers and distributor organizations partly questioned the meaningfulness of strong relationships and commitment in consultancy services. A very close-knit and exclusive relationship was experienced to hinder innovation and knowledge creation. Distributor organizations attempt to rather build knowledge creation networks than to form and develop relationships with individual consultancy companies.

Tangible and significant equity investments, which would tie the customer to the industrial services company, are usually not made when buying consultancy services. Thus, it is possible to have consultancy companies bid against each other with every new commission. On the other hand, acquiring customer specific knowledge and creating trust take time, and changing service providers can therefore be expensive.

The strategic importance of the service is connected to the willingness of the end customer to maintain the relationship. Even when management does not participate in the service, the case company's owner-manager tries to motivate management to invest in the service and to commit to the relationship by modifying the service in such away that it is strategically as important as possible to the customer company. Preliminary discussions with management are a key in discovering the critical issues for each customer company. In addition, maintaining the relevance of the company brand enables maintaining long-term relationships as the consultancy company is then considered to be able to respond to customer needs over a long period of time.

DISCUSSION

Results of the study

This study developed a model that identifies both specific branding activities and a holistic view of the micro-sized industrial service company branding as a process. The special characteristics of a micro industrial services company influence the available branding activities and the way they are utilised. This study built on an extensive review of previous theory, but was not confined by it. This was important, because the study addresses the branding of a micro-sized company with scarce resources supporting innovative and affordable branding activities. Based on the empirical research a model of branding a micro industrial services company was developed (see Figure 1.).
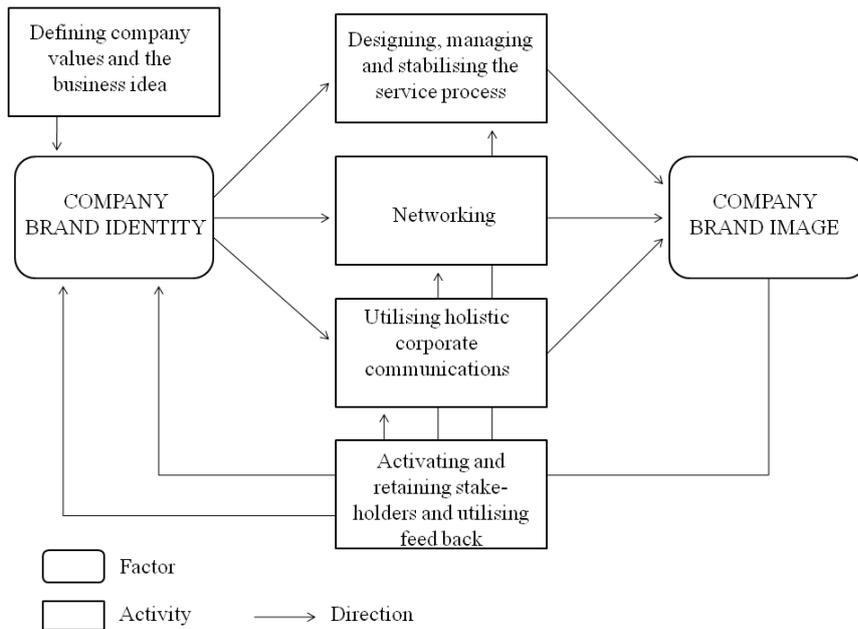
Figure 1. Company branding process of a micro industrial services company

Five main activities were identified in building the company brand of a micro-sized consultancy company. *Defining the company values and the business idea* are central in developing the company brand identity, which is connected to all branding activities. *Designing and managing the service process* are keys in raising desired associations of the company. By *utilising holistic corporate communications* a coherent brand image can be developed. Though *networking* the company can gain access to complementary resources, which can significantly boost its branding efforts. By *activating and retaining stakeholders and utilising feedback* the company can develop its brand.

The branding process is cyclical. The arrows in the model demonstrate the connections between different factors and activities as well as the direction of the process. The activities are however somewhat overlapping. By activating and retaining stakeholders and continuously utilising collected feedback the company can constantly develop its brand. Stakeholder feedback is also utilised before an image has been developed already before the company is officially founded, for example when mapping out if there is demand for the services. Due to the flexibility of a micro organization feedback is not only utilised strategically by developing the brand identity. It is also utilised operationally by implementing feedback directly into the branding activities. This enables the micro company to effectively maintain the relevance of its company brand. In addition to mapping out branding activities, the model demonstrates these above mentioned connections between the company brand identity, the company brand image and the activities.

Theoretical implications

According to the best knowledge of the authors, this is the first model that focuses on the external branding process, taking into consideration the small size of the company and its industrial service offering. Previous services company branding models have concentrated on the internal aspect of branding, with the exceptions of Berry (2000) and Grönroos' (2007) general models that lack details about the branding activities. However, since the challenges in micro company branding do not revolve around internal communication and internal

operations, the model presented in this study excluded internal branding and communications, with the exception of defining the company brand identity.

The study supports the notion that a value based company brand identity guides the whole company brand building process. This study confirms the notion of Knox and Bickerton (2003) that the business idea is an essential part of the company identity. Defining the business idea has not previously been noted in the service context as a relevant branding activity. As are values, so is the business idea connected to how stakeholders evaluate the company. Stakeholder appreciation towards the business idea is a prerequisite for building a strong company brand. Values are a core element of the corporate identity whereas the business idea is more peripheral and can be more actively modified. As Ojasalo *et al.* (2008) have stated the flexibility of the business idea enables maintaining the relevance of the corporate brand.

This study found that different branding strategies suit different customer groups. Likewise, Mudambi (2000) suggests that branding can be more important to some customer groups than others. In industrial services service process stabilisation meets the preferences of customer companies that are not used to buying consulting services. The same does not apply to organizations that have the purchasing knowledge (and whose core competence it is to stabilise services), such as business support service organizations that buy the services to support their own clients. As Inskip (2004) and Krake (2005) state, personalisation of the company brand is to some extent unavoidable in a micro company for the inseparability of the service and the professional providing it. This study found that it is a useful supporting branding strategy with distributor companies.

The study confirmed that holistic corporate communications play a central part in company branding as stated by previous research (see Balmer 1995, 189; Arora & Stoner 1996; Harris & de Chernatony 2001; Grönroos 2007, 342), also in the context of micro industrial services company. Unlike research on company branding (Balmer & Gray 2000) has stated, but as presumed based on research on services (e.g. Johnson, Zinkhan & Ayala 1998; Grace & O'Cass 2002) this study indicates that tertiary communication can play a more important role than secondary communications in branding a industrial services micro company. The possibility for co-branding has been mentioned in previous SME branding literature (see Ojasalo *et al.* 2008). Networks and co-branding have, however, been for the most part addressed as one possibility among others in company branding strategies and as a future scenario (e.g. Knox *et al.* 2000, 143; Vargo & Lusch 2004; Jevons *et al.* 2005). Moreover, this study suggests that brand building without networks and related co-branding would be extremely challenging in the context in question. As stated by Ojasalo *et al.* (2008) branding operations are characterised by creativity and affordability and they are focused on narrow target segments.

Although research on branding in the consumer services sector stresses the importance of the experiential aspect of designing and managing the service process (see e.g. Roberts & Merrilees 2007), this study suggests that the experiential aspect of the service process has a more instrumental role in industrial services as management, which pays for the service, does not necessarily experience it themselves. Thus, unlike stressed in previous research (see Johnson & Zinkhan 1991; Reid 2008), the functional quality of the service (service outcome) is at least equally strongly connected to developing a positive company brand image as technical quality (service production process) is. However, as presumed (see Reid 2008),

relationship quality, which is related to the service process was found to be central in branding industrial services.

In line with research on SME marketing (e.g. Scarborough & Zimmerer 1996, 245–250), flexibility and the ability to react quickly to stakeholder signals is a strength for micro companies. Unlike presumed in the theoretical part of this study, stakeholder feedback is not only connected to the branding activities of a micro company on a strategic level through the company's brand identity, but feedback has also a direct operative connection to implementing the service process, communications and networking. By outlining the relationships between different factors and activities this study found completely new relationships missing in previous research.

Unlike Uggla (2006) states, this study found that cooperative companies enable transferring predominantly company brand image, but not company brand identity from one company to another. The latter can be explained by the finding that distributor companies do not aim at creating firm relationships with consultancy companies. Finally, the study supports stakeholder activation as stressed by Gregory (2007) as a central, but challenging part of branding an industrial services micro company.

Managerial implications

Due to the special characteristics of micro companies, their owner-managers would benefit from emphasising networking in their company branding, because it is an affordable and efficient branding activity, however, networking does also have to be planned. Owner-managers should not try to utilise each and every one of their company's partners, but select the customers and other stakeholders with the most potential to convey their desired image. Associating the firm with well-known and respected partners is a way of raising the awareness of the company brand and of transferring positive brand associations to the smaller, lesser-known company.

The above suggested strategy can be successful only if each partner's corporate image with the potential customers of the micro company is carefully evaluated beforehand. Owner-managers need to be sure that partners' images are positive with associations that fit with the values of the micro company. Thus, the first thing to do is to define the micro company's own values and try to build strong relationships with companies and organisations with compatible value bases.

Owner-managers ought to take note that networks have not only a strategic, but also an operative significance for micro industrial services firms with scarce resources that are striving to minimise fixed costs. Effective networking could provide the micro organisation with a space in which to perform their service and also with materials to do so, and with potentially more marketing and branding knowledge behind them. Cooperative organisations also market and sell the services to end customers on behalf of the micro firm in a way impossible for the micro company to do on its own.

Although value-based company brand identity guides the brand building process in this specific context, and the business idea is one core element of it, owner-managers must not forget the meaning of distinct strategic brand planning and goal setting. Brand development should be a conscious and an ambitious process. That is what makes it possible to avoid the "everything is branding and nothing is branding" kind of trap where different levels of

communication (from primary to tertiary communication) are not utilized in an integrated and balanced way, for example. Although tertiary communication is an important consideration for micro companies, other aspects of holistic corporate communication should also be taken into account.

Likewise, it is important to remember the meaning of concretizing the service offering, although customer-specific tailoring has a big role in expert services. This is especially noteworthy when a service as abstract as expertise is in question. Utilising service modularity (e.g., Pekkarinen & Ulkuniemi 2008) to a suitable extent can help in profiling and positioning the brand because it makes expertise more explicit and accessible to all the stakeholders. In addition, it facilitates networking because the modular service offering is more easily combined with services offered by other actors in the network.

For owner-managers, stakeholder feedback is a central source of information on how the brand is being received among stakeholders and how it would be beneficial to develop it further. Stakeholder activation is essential in developing the relevance of the company brand, and stakeholder retention in securing its continuity.

As previously stated, a manager must not forget that the company brand identity influences the branding activities of the company. In the same way the brand identity develops as a continuum to changes in the operations and the operational environment, for which stakeholder feedback functions as a significant source of information. Even at the very beginning of company operations, corporate identity does not develop in a vacuum without being influenced by stakeholders.

Limitations of the study and suggestions for further research

Three criteria are commonly used to assess the rigor of qualitative case studies: construct validity, external validity and reliability (Yin 2003, 34). Construct validity refers to the quality of the conceptualisation of the relevant concept (Gibbert, Ruigrok & Wicki 2008) in other words, how accurately a study investigates what it claims to investigate (Yin 2003, 33–34). The construct validity of this study was improved by executing an extensive literary review in the research subject and relevant concepts. Following Ali & Birley (1999), when gathering data through interviews, nontheoretical questions were posed in order to prevent conceptual confusion and when interviewees used a theoretical concept they were asked to define what it meant to them. The research process was described in this study in order to establish a chain of evidence (see Yin 2003, 36).

The limitations of a single case study sample were mediated with data triangulation (Easton 1995, 475; Carson & Coviello 1996; O'Donnell & Cummins 1999) of thematic interviews interviews, open conversations, discussions and participatory observation as well as different documents. This and gathering data from multiple sources enabled the researchers to look at the research phenomenon from different viewpoints (see Eisenhardt 1989).

External validity refers to the generalizability of the study in other settings (Yin, 2003, 37). This study strived not for statistical generalizability, but for analytical generalizability, in other words, expansion and generalization of theories (Yin 2003, 10). Describing the characteristics of a single case can offer new insight that crosses over the limits of one situation (Hill *et al.* 1999). The external validity of the study was improved by executing an extensive literary review in the research subject.

Reliability refers to the transparency and repeatability of the study (Holstein & Gubrium 1995, 9). In order to improve the transparency of the research a case study database was created for storing all gathered data facilitating retrieval for later investigations. In addition, informants were given citations for review in order to avoid misinterpretations of the data. In order to improve the repeatability of the study a case company was selected that would be representative of industrial services micro company (see Gibbert *et al.* 2008). Consultancy companies are considered traditional and typical industrial services company. The repeatability of the study is weakened by the fact that the case company being a micro company employing only the owner-manager. The importance of the internal aspect of branding an internal communications can be presumed to rise with personnel.

Qualitative methods and a single case study were used in this study in order to reach a more profound understanding of a research subject that has received little attention in branding literature. Qualitative studies with data from a sample of micro and small companies representing different industries and cultural settings are needed to reach a thorough empirical grounding of the model presented here. Moreover, the causality of the connections presented in the model could be in future tested with quantitative methods (see Whetten 1989).

Previous literature has not addressed networking as an integral part of branding. The network aspect of branding deserves more attention in future branding research. An interesting part of this could be internal branding in the network, which existing theory has only hinted could exist. Previous research strongly directed this study towards company branding. However, it was discovered that product branding, in the form of service stabilisation, can also play a role in branding in the industrial services sector. More profound research on brand hierarchies in the service sector is clearly needed.

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