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Keywords

Brand equity, Internet, Experts

Abstract

This paper approaches the subject of brand equity measurement on and offline. The existing body of research knowledge on brand equity measurement has derived from classical contexts; however, the majority of today's brands prosper simultaneously online and offline. Since branding on the Web needs to address the unique characteristics of computer-mediated environments, it was posited that classical measures of brand equity were inadequate for this category of brands. Aaker's guidelines for building a brand equity measurement system were thus followed and his brand equity ten was employed as a point of departure. The main challenge was complementing traditional measures of brand equity with new measures pertinent to the Web. Following 16 semi-structured interviews with experts, ten additional measures were identified.

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Introduction

Scholarly and popular inquiry into brand equity has led to the development of a significant body of research, validated principally in classical contexts. Within this framework, brand equity was investigated from different perspectives (e.g. customer vs firm), and resulting measures were tested using data obtained from different product categories. Today, the Web has become an integral part of the contemporary "brandscape" with the majority of brands growing both online and offline. Being the first computer-mediated environment (Hoffman and Novak, 1996), the Web possesses some unique qualities on which brands can capitalise. As yet, brand equity measurement has not been re-examined in view of this development.

This paper shows that the ten dimensions Aaker (1996) postulates as characterising brand equity in a physical environment should be augmented by a further ten factors when brands are mastered both on and offline. The paper opens with a literature review of prior research on brand equity. It then describes the process of interviewing 16 experts to identify the dimensions of on and offline brand equity, which go beyond classical contexts and also encompass online branding. This is followed by a discussion of the ten factors, based on our qualitative findings, which are interwoven with extant e-marketing theories. The paper concludes by explicating the implications of this research for brand practitioners, and suggests areas of future research.

Literature review: brand equity

Brand equity has been the subject of increasing research attention over the past two decades. The literature review shows a recent proliferation of academic publications on the topic (e.g. Yoo and Donthu, 2001; Czellar and Denis, 2002; Moore *et al.*, 2002; Vazquez *et al.*, 2002; Washburn and Plank, 2002; Myers, 2003; Broniarczyk and Gershoff, 2003). Our understanding of the construct has been stalled by a lack of consensus about its conceptualisation, resulting in a plethora of diverse methodological approaches to its measurement (Mackay, 2001; Vazquez *et al.*, 2002; de Chernatony *et al.*, 2004). As Berthon *et al.* (2001, p. 1) so succinctly phrased it, "perhaps the only thing that has not been reached with regard to brand equity is a conclusion".

One of the most commonly cited definitions of brand equity is Aaker's (1991):

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> ... a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name and symbol, that add to or subtract from the value provided by a product or service to a firm and/or to that firm's customers.

This definition implies that brand equity can be analysed on two levels, depending on the beneficiary of value (firm or customers). The study of brand equity as value to customers is known as "customer-based brand equity" (or customer brand equity) and its study as financial value to the firm is known as "firm-based brand equity" (or organisational brand equity) (Capon *et al.*, 2001). Brand equity research in marketing has largely concentrated on customer-based as opposed to firm-based brand equity. This is because, unlike the firm-based approach which centres around financial valuation issues and provides little usable information for brand managers, the customer-based approach offers insights into customer behaviour convertible into actionable brand strategies (Keller, 1993). As a result, significant advances have been made in terms of conceptualisation (Keller, 1993; Erdem and Swait, 1998), measurement (Kamakura and Russel, 1993; Park and Srinivasan, 1994; Leuthesser *et al.*, 1995; Yoo and Donthu, 2001; Vazquez *et al.*, 2002), and validation of measuring instruments (François and MacLachlan, 1995; Agarwal and Rao, 1996; Mackay, 2001; Washburn and Plank, 2002) of customer-based brand equity.

Knowledge of customer-based brand equity has evolved from two paradigms: cognitive psychology and signalling theory in information economics (Erdem and Swait, 1998; Sweeney and Swait, 1999; Czellar and Denis, 2002). The dominant stream of research has been grounded in cognitive psychology, focusing on memory structure (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993). Adopting a psycho-cognitive foundation, Keller (1993, p. 2) defined customer-based brand equity as "the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand". According to this conceptualisation, a brand is positively valued when the customer reacts more favourably to the marketing-mix of a product with a known brand name compared to an identical, yet, unbranded product. Brand knowledge is conceptualised as an "associative network memory model" consisting of two dimensions: brand awareness and brand associations in consumer memory. Positive customer-based brand equity occurs when the customer is aware of the brand and holds strong, unique and favourable brand associations in memory.

Research on brand equity rooted in information economics takes into consideration the imperfect and asymmetrical nature of markets. This requires economic agents to transmit information about their specific characteristics using signals. According to Erdem and Swait (1998), brand names act as signals for consumers. From this point of view, a brand signal is the sum of its marketing activities (past and/or present). Imperfect and asymmetrical market information creates uncertainty in consumers' minds about available products and services. A credible brand signal can contribute towards creating customer value by:

- reducing perceived risk;
- reducing information search costs; and
- creating favourable attribute perceptions.

Within this framework, customer-based brand equity is defined as "the value of a brand as a signal to consumers" (Erdem and Swait, 1998, p. 140).

Operating within the psycho-cognitive paradigm, which represents the dominant paradigm in brand equity research, we opted for the widely quoted Marketing Science Institute (MSI) definition:

> ... a set of associations and behaviors on the part of a brand's consumers, channel members and parent corporation that enables a brand to earn greater volume or greater margins than it could without the brand name and, in addition, provides a strong, sustainable and differential advantage (Srivastava and Shocker, 1991, p. 5).

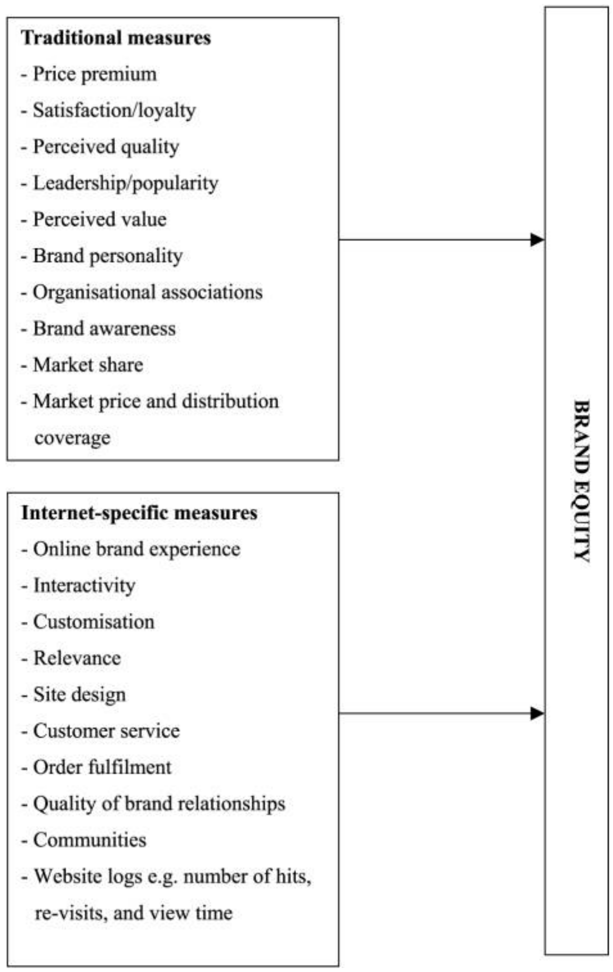
This definition aligns with our views on the ontology of brands which fall within the scope of the "holistic approach" as opposed to the "product plus approach" to branding (Styles and Ambler, 1995; Ambler and Styles, 1997).

Having defined the construct under investigation, the subsequent section describes the methodology used to identify the dimensions of on and offline brands' customer-based brand equity.

Methodology

Following Aaker's (1996) recommendations on how to devise a brand equity measure for a particular context, we used his "brand equity ten" as a starting point, and sought to complement this with additional measures specific to the online environment. According to Aaker (1996), his recommended set of measures was influenced by two industry-led efforts to assess brand equity: the Brand Asset Valuator (Young and Rubicam) and EquiTrend (Total Research). The measures comprising Aaker's (1996) brand equity ten are classified into five categories. The first four categories reflect customers' evaluations of a brand on the four dimensions of brand equity (loyalty, perceived quality, associations and awareness), while the fifth category encompasses two market behaviour measures for which information is not collected directly from consumers. A complete list of the brand equity ten is provided in Figure 1 (see "Traditional measures").

Figure 1 Traditional and Internet-specific measures of brand equity



In order to supplement this list with new measures appropriate for brands using the Internet, a two-fold methodology was employed. First, we conducted a comprehensive review of the literature on online branding and online customer behaviour. Recognising that practice is ahead of theory development in the area of e-marketing – partly because of the newness of the medium – we conducted 16 (semi-structured) depth interviews with online branding experts. To reflect the way that online branding is supported by a plethora of marketing specialists, we sought a sample that would reflect this diversity. Thus, we approached digital brand consultants, interactive consultants, design consultants, advertising consultants and leading academics in the areas of branding and/or e-marketing. Interviews were undertaken in the UK. The duration of each interview was approximately one hour.

A topic guide was used to provide a degree of structural cohesion to the interviewing process (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 1991). This allowed important questions to be examined within the limited time frame for interviews, including:

- What are the characteristics of strong Internet brands?
- Are the components that make up brand equity online different from those offline?
- What do you think are the determinants of brand equity online?

In addition, follow-up questions were posed in the course of the interviews, where necessary, to get respondents to clarify or develop their arguments. The topic guide was piloted with two respondents prior to its use in the main data collection.

The interviews were tape recorded, transcribed and reviewed by the authors. Content analysis was then performed on the interview transcripts in line with the guidelines of Krippendorff (1980) and Miles and Huberman (1994). The intercoder reliability was established through the use of an independent coder who checked our initial coding. The coefficient of agreement was calculated at 82.2 percent which was considered acceptable (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Discrepancies were resolved by consensus decision.

Based on both our literature review and the depth interviews with experts, the items that were found to be most appropriate for the purpose of complementing traditional measures of brand equity are shown in Figure 1.

What follows is a detailed discussion of the proposed measures of brand equity, which are pertinent to the online space. For each measure, the qualitative findings are interlaced with the relevant literature from e-marketing.

Discussion

Online brand experience

An online brand experience encompasses all points of interaction between the customer and the brand in the virtual space. The significance of the overall brand experience on the Internet has been lately accentuated by academics (Schmitt, 1999, 2000; Adam and Shaw, 2001; Chang *et al.*, 2002) and consultants (Pine and Gilmore, 1998, 1999; Kearney, 1999; Dayal *et al.*, 2000; Norton and Hansen, 2000; Roser, 2001). As Rubinstein and Griffiths (2001, p. 401) note, "[on] the Net you have to orchestrate everything you do to deliver a highly differentiated and consistent positive experience".

The first to exemplify the value of experiences in the new economy were Pine and Gilmore (1998, 1999), who argued that experiences represent a fourth economic value which had been largely unrecognised. According to these authors, there has been a transition from an industrial economy through a service economy to what they call an "experience economy". Given this progression of

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economic value, Pine and Gilmore (1999, p. 17) encourage marketers to "create a brand image emphasizing the experience customers can have surrounding the purchase, use, or ownership of a good". In addition, they point out that cyberspace comprises an ideal platform for staging experiences, elucidating that staging experiences is not about entertaining customers; it is about engaging them. Pine and Gilmore (1998, 1999) provide a useful model to facilitate thinking about experiences across two dimensions. The first dimension refers to customer participation while the second pertains to the connection that unites customers with the event or the performance. They recommend that the richest experiences are those encompassing aspects of all realms, thus, encouraging firms to position their staged experiences in the so-called "sweet spot" that lies in the middle of the framework. Pine and Gilmore (1999) ascribe America Online's success to this collective experience its members enjoy as they navigate through the available options.

Concurring with Pine and Gilmore (1998, 1999), Schmitt (1999) argues that three trends in the broad commercial environment have caused a paradigm shift from traditional "features-and-benefits" marketing toward "experiential marketing". These trends are:

(1) The omnipresence of information technology.
(2) The supremacy of the brand.
(3) The ubiquity of communications and entertainment.

Traditionally, brands have been viewed as identifiers; however, this marketing shift has called for brands to be equated with experiences (Schmitt, 1999, 2000).

Adam and Shaw (2001) conducted empirical research within an online context to examine the dimensions of an experience as conceptualised by Pine and Gilmore (1998, 1999). Their analysis suggested that the two dimensions were not completely independent with ominous implications about their validity. Having characterised it as a mere artefact or "a mid-point of convenience" for respondents, Adam and Shaw (2001) also attacked Pine and Gilmore's (1998, 1999) so-called "sweet spot". However, it can be argued that their adoption of single-item measures for capturing the two dimensions of an experience (as opposed to multi-item measures), raises concerns about the generalisibility of their findings.

Dayal *et al.* (2000, p. 42) highlight the inextricable relationship between an online customer experience and the brand as follows: "[on] the World Wide Web, the brand is the experience and the experience is the brand". They claim that there are two reasons underlying the need for building a digital brand around consumer experiences. First, it forces marketers to become buyer-centric. Second, it renders marketers accountable for the monitoring of all facets of brand interactions with consumers. In Mitchell's (2001) words:

> . . . [t]hese "little things" – or "moments of truth", as some marketers call them – transform our understanding of brands. The brand is no longer the advertising or the product. The brand emerges from the sum total of real-life interactions between customer and company.

The relationship between the brand and the online experience was explored further in our interviews with experts. Brand consultant 1 upheld that the transparency of the Internet underlies the online experience which in turn affects brand perceptions:

> . . . it's very transparent on the Internet. You know, you experience the brand in real time. So, if at any part of the process it doesn't work, it has an impact on how you perceive that brand.

Academic 1 noted that creating a good online brand experience for customers is not a sufficient prerequisite for brand loyalty. The aim is to outperform similar experiences staged by competitors:

> We often find new dotcoms coming in very attractive and interesting site designs and doing things which are, from a presentation point of view, very user friendly and log on to them very quickly and things like that. But the brand experience won't be any better than competitors. . . Therefore, even if the exposure is very good but if the experience is not so good then the consumer may not develop brand loyalty to that Web site.

A positive online brand experience stems from companies who master the medium, understand their audience, and communicate a clear set of brand values, as seen in:

> So, I think it's an understanding of the medium, it's an understanding of the audience and an understanding of what the brand stands for. It's these three things all together. If [the company] it can demonstrate that, then you have got a good online experience (Interactive consultant 1).

Interactivity

Both scholars and practitioners of marketing are unanimous in that interactivity is a crucial component of successful Internet marketing (Blattberg and Deighton, 1991; Berthon *et al.*, 1996; Hoffman and Novak, 1996; Bezjian-Avery and Calder, 1998; Ind and Riondino, 2001; Thorbjornsen *et al.*, 2002). Hoffman and Novak (1996) contended that the Web represents the first computer-mediated environment, which exemplifies an interactive many-to-many communications platform. Their conceptual

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contribution suggests that information is not simply transmitted from the sender to the receiver, but rather customers interact with the medium, the firm and other customers. According to Blattberg and Deighton (1991), interactivity is defined as the facility for individuals and organisations to communicate directly with one another regardless of time and space. Similarly, Alba *et al.* (1997, p. 38) conceptualise interactivity as "a continuous construct capturing the quality of two-way communication between two parties". Extending Berthon *et al.*'s (1996) hypothesis that the level of interactivity available in a Web site can be critical in getting users involved in the marketing communications process, Ghose and Dou (1998) postulated that interactivity plays a significant role in affecting the attractiveness of a corporate Web site. Ghose and Dou (1998) identified 23 manifestations of interactivity such as software downloading, site survey, keyword search, user groups and games. The results of their empirical research suggest that the degree and nature of interactivity have a statistically significant effect on the perceived quality of corporate Web sites.

Interactivity emerged as a common theme among our interviewees. Arguably, interactivity is the element that renders the Internet different from traditional media:

> We have an interesting opportunity with the Web. Because it can be of one-to-one communication it can be sort of very personal, and it's also interactive, and it's also private time with the person so it differs (Brand consultant 2).

> [Online] you can have greater exposure to your brand and you can have greater interaction with that brand (Advertising consultant 1).

Interactive consultant 2 notes that only a few brands have managed to exploit this potential of the Web and have become successful online:

> . . . a very few, brilliant Web sites have got the right feeling, feeling involved in terms of it's an interactive experience, feeling presence. You get the sense that there are other people involved in this experience.

Interactivity is therefore expected to influence the way that brand equity is created online.

> Because of the interactivity of the medium and because of the sort of ability to play with it, it is going to influence the way that brand equity is built differently than online (Brand consultant 2).

Customisation

Kelly and Reed (2001, p. 44) argue that "it is no longer enough for manufacturers to present brands to consumers fully formed and rigid". In a similar vein, Wind and Rangaswamy (2001, p. 19) note that "what was once a DC marketing circuit has become an AC circuit, alternating between the marketer and the customer". It is the age of "mass customisation" facilitated by the Internet and its related technologies. Mass customisation is defined by Hart (1996, p. 13) as "the use of flexible processes and organizational structures to produce varied and often individually customized products and services at the price of standardized mass-produced alternatives".

In the online space, customisation requires knowledge of individual-level preferences in order to provide unique content of direct relevance to each customer (Ansari and Mela, 2003). Thus, portals such as Yahoo and Excite allow users to self-customise the content of the Web site. For instance, users of such portal sites have the opportunity to specify keywords of interest against which news stories are filtered, to choose their preferred background or to manipulate other design features and so forth. According to Ansari and Mela (2003), such user-initiated customisation has the advantage of encouraging preferences through empowering users to define what they want. Similarly, shopping Web sites use recommendation systems in order to recommend products or content to customers (Ansari *et al.*, 2000). Amazon, for example, tracks a customer's purchases and then provides a customised list of suggested readings when the customer revisits the site. In connection, Clauser (2001) framed a matrix showing four possible levels of customisation based on two dimensions, namely visibility to the customer and customer control.

Wind and Rangaswamy (2001, p. 14) coined the term "customerisation" to distinguish mass product customisation from "the new approach that combines mass customization with customized marketing". According to these authors, customerisation is inherently dependent on the Internet, as e-technologies facilitate the implementation of this concept in an economical way. Wind and Rangaswamy (2001) argue that customerisation is likely to have a profound impact on e-branding as pioneering companies such as Reflect.com present customers not only with a customised Web site and with customised, products, but even with a customised brand name.

The extract below shows that customisation (also referred to as personalisation) is a powerful tool which enables marketers to become more relevant to customer needs and to acknowledge customers' individuality, resulting in augmented consumer value:

> Personalisation, so recognisation of who I am. I mean a sensible use of customer data, gathering data about me and using it in an intelligent way to provide a better service to me. Amazon do that very well. That's the heart of what they do. They are true direct marketers online. They take every piece of data they can about me, not necessarily by just asking me the question but also by inference from

> things that I do. Then they use that in an interesting and relevant way to try and sell to me. So "people who have bought this book also bought ... " is a fantastic way of using customer data. It's incredibly simple but it's very powerful, because I can't help but be interested in those kind of connections. Or you do a search for a particular book. And they advised you of when the author's next book comes out. They proactively send you an e-mail and don't have to go and search and see has this book come out, they will tell me when that book's come out (Advertising consultant 2).

Yet, not all forms of personalisation are meaningful to consumers:

> ... you know that thing of being told who you are: "you are George". Well, you know you are George! You don't need a Web site to tell you that, or an e-mail to tell you that (Interactive consultant 1).

Relevance

Young and Rubicam's model of brand equity defined brand strength as differentiation multiplied by relevance. Despite Aaker (1996) not including relevance in his brand equity ten, we feel relevance becomes even more important given the over-communicated virtual world. Brymer (2001, p. 93) maintains that the biggest challenge for marketers:

> ... is not just to gain name recognition for brands, but to create a relevance in a world where brands need to meet individual needs.

Our research supports this view, as illustrated by the following comments:

> I think that the relevance is a key component (Brand consultant 2).

> The important thing is that the marketing, the advertising, the PR, the branding are all put together coherently, effectively, and are relevant to the target market (Brand consultant 3).

> Particularly in an online context, it's stuff that is relevant and interesting to the brand (Brand consultant 4).

The route to relevance passes through greater precision in targeting:

> In fact you have to be more targeted [online] (Brand consultant 4).

> There's no question that we can do more segmentation and targeting [online] (Academic 3).

Site design

Omanson *et al.* (2002, p. 1) propound that "[a] critical consideration for companies is how to design their Web site to support the brand experience". Drawing an analogy between the term "atmospherics" – originally coined by Kotler (1973-1974) to indicate that the shopping environment can be more important than the product itself – and the online context, Chang *et al.* (2002) emphasise that in today's marketspace the importance of atmospherics has shifted to Web site design. Szymanski and Hise (2000) argue that site design is one of the key factors influencing customer satisfaction and it is in turn expected to influence a brand's equity.

Web design is not just about visual appeal but encompasses a number of functional parameters that need to be in place to underpin the online brand experience. Ease of navigation and ease of use are important considerations when designing a Web site, as seen in the comments below:

> Once you have decided that you want to try that product or service or their online experience, then part of that has got to do with ease of use. By that I mean navigation, I mean simplicity. Never being more than one click away from the home page. To know exactly where you are on the site and to be able to get back in relative comfort if you lose your way. I think you have to have absolute 100 percent reliability and site loading (Brand consultant 5).

> A positive online brand experience is an entity that I can look into very easily without a lot of search (Academic 1).

> There are some hygiene factors to go through. First is take me where I want to go, and take me there quickly. And that is a hygiene factor, but it should be on all sites (Interactive consultant 3).

Appreciating rather than abusing customers' time is what good Web design boils down to. As Design consultant 1 put it, "the ultimate experience is like I want this information in one minute. Go and find it for me." Use of heavy graphics has a negative impact on download time:

> It's the actual mechanics of the Web site. Does it work? Is it slick? Is it fast? Is it not overly sophisticated or is it too sophisticated? That's a problem with a lot of the Web sites that went to ground early on like Boo.com that carries a very nice Web site and is very technologically advanced but it's not what customers wanted. It's too much and it may have looked good, but it took ages to download. So you need something that's simplistic but at the same time looks good" (Brand consultant 3).

In addition, design needs to be integrated with the appropriate content. Interactive consultant 1 used the following metaphor to convey the fundamental role of content for e-branding:

> There's an awful lot of brand owners who think that the online presence for a brand doesn't need to take content into account at all. And they think that they can just wave a magic wand of interface design or something or just design and it's all sorted and they need no content at all... It's almost like having a theatre, having all the actors, but not actually having any play.

Customer service

Customer service has become the key differentiating factor that potentially determines

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the success or failure of online brands (Lennon and Harris, 2002). Kleindl (2001) notes seven best practice components of online customer service:

(1) Furnishing product, security and shipping information.
(2) Providing link(s) to inventory to determine if products are available.
(3) Sending automatic order confirmations.
(4) Avoiding fees that are not charged by offline retailers.
(5) Responding to customers quickly.
(6) Providing alternative means of contact (toll-free numbers, e-mail, fax, address etc.).
(7) Using "live" individuals to support automated functions.

Customer service can also be delivered in other ways. The use of a Help or FAQ section can address some common customer concerns. Another application which is particularly useful is the ability to receive "live" and interactive help through text chat with brand representatives on a one-to-one basis (for example, redenvelope.com or bt.com). In addition, customers wishing to book their tickets via thomascook.com are able to do so via the phone as an alternative to the online transaction. Furthermore, customers can fill in a brief form stating their contact details and their preferred time when thomascook.com representatives will call them back to complete their booking.

'... The Internet provides an excellent platform for companies to foster genuine relationships with potential and actual customers based on a continuous dialogue... '

Online brands cannot renounce the service element which has been assimilated into their *raison d'être*. As Interactive consultant 2 argued, "all Internet companies are service companies even if they are selling simple products". Academic 2 was particularly emphatic about the crucial role of online customer service for the success of online brands, "I think good customer service is what it [a strong brand online] comes down to as a whole". Good online customer service is responsive and attentive to individual enquiries: "is there a responsive mechanism to come back to me with specific questions that I might have, whether it be a support line or whether it be an e-mail?" (Brand consultant 3).

Order fulfilment

Evidence suggests that most service failures online occur in the fulfilment area (Venkat, 2001). If items delivered do not match the order or if there is a long delay in delivery, customer frustration is likely to result, which in turn negatively affects that brand's equity. Order fulfilment spans both the online and the real world and provides connections between the online and offline experiences. If the offline consumption of a physical product does not meet customer expectations, then no matter how good the online experience is, it will not offset the unsatisfactory offline experience:

> When I get the book or get the stuff, I say oh no. Then, no matter what song and dance someone puts on the Web, I would advise against it to my colleagues (Academic 1).

Brand relationships

Individuals value their relationships with brands, and Fournier (1998) introduced the brand relationship quality (BRQ) construct as an indicator of the quality of consumer-brand relationships. She argued that BRQ is a multidimensional construct consisting of six components (love/passion, self-connection, personal commitment, intimacy, partner quality and behavioural interdependence), each capturing a unique aspect of the polymorphous consumer-brand relationships. These dimensions were produced through qualitative consumer research, but have recently been operationalised and empirically tested in an online context by Thorbjornsen *et al.* (2002). We feel that Fournier's (1998) BRQ construct overlooks a significant component of consumers' relationships with brands, namely trust (Blackston, 2000; Delgado-Ballester *et al.*, 2003). Brand trust is even more pertinent in an online context in light of customers' mounting concerns about data privacy and transaction security.

In an early attempt to identify the determinants of corporate success on the Internet, Moore and Andradi (1996) showed the importance for incumbent companies to leverage and extend their existing customer relationships online. Wadia (2001) also noted that relationships with customers have become one of the key differentiating factors, given the enormous choice customers are presented with in each product category. In his view, "it is these relationships that allow the customer to see an offering as a solution rather than yet another product or service competing for his limited time and attention" (Wadia, 2001, p. 10).

Rubinstein (2002, p. 33) observed an emerging shift in emphasis that "branding is about communications" to "branding is about creating valued relationships with customers". No longer is it enough for marketers to create an image for a brand and pass it on to the consumer (Holland and Baker, 2001). The Internet provides an excellent platform for companies to foster genuine relationships with potential and actual customers based on a continuous dialogue. As Advertising consultant 1 observed, "now what it enables you to do is to e-mail or through Web-based activities to develop a real relationship". In a similar vein, Brand consultant 4 claimed, "the opportunity is to develop tighter relationships with smaller and more focused target groups". The next quote provides support for our postulation that the quality of brand relationships has an impact on brand equity:

> The equity, as I said, is a measure of the relationship. It's a measure of the emotional bond and clearly, this is now, for many constituent agencies, the primary channel in which I can interact with my brand. So, therefore, the way in which the Web is used or abused by the brand can have a material impact on the how I relate to it (Advertising consultant 1).

Communities

Shaw (1996, p. S9) argues that the Internet and related e-technologies "allow companies to develop and build relationships with consumers in ways that were not previously possible due to physical constraints, such as time, cost and distance". To this end, online brand communities facilitate a closer relationship between the company and different stakeholders. According to Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) brand communities revolutionise traditional dyadic customer-brand relationships by integrating customer-to-customer interaction. McAlexander *et al.* (2002) offered a shift of perspective arguing that brand communities are customer-focused and must be centred around the brand *per se*. Both scholars and consultants (Armstrong and Hagel, 1996; Hagel, 1999; Kozinets, 1999; McWilliam, 2000) have emphasised the potential benefits to marketers associated with building an online community around their brand, and they identified a need for a new set of skills for managing these interactions encapsulated by Levine *et al.* (2000):

> How are you going to manage these conversations? You're not. As soon as you try, you destroy them.

Kozinets (1999, p. 263) admonishes that "the goal is not to control information, but to use it wisely in order to build solid, long-lasting relationships with products or brands". Similarly, de Chernatony (2001) extends this "loose" (or relaxed) approach of managing conversations and brand communities to managing online brands. Upshaw (2001) provides examples of three brands which embody community building, i.e. eBay, Yahoo and America Online, referring to these as "brand.comms". A brand.comm is "an online community that draws strength from a masterbrand that is owned by both the sponsoring company and its constituencies" (Upshaw, 2001, p. 37).

Brand consultant 1 shows how cyber-communities can enhance or erode a brand's equity:

> One of the things about cyber-communities is that the information about a brand is spread around the world very much faster. Communities have access to each other and to information about any brand much more rapidly than they used to. So, when a brand – particularly a global brand – screws up, everyone gets to hear about it. If you think about Nike as an example of a community of interest, once it was discovered they were using cheap labour in the Far East that spread like wild fire and had an impact all over the world. And I think that was impossible before. So the Internet magnifies both your failures and your successes very fast to a lot of people.

On the other hand, communities can be harnessed to generate substantial word-of-mouth, leading to high levels of brand awareness. Friends Reunited capitalised on this viral marketing model to build their brand:

> [Friends Reunited] they had the community effect and so, the word-of-mouth for Friends Reunited was huge and . . . it's a viral model (Advertising consultant 2).

Web site logs

Each time a user accesses a Web page, a variety of information is recorded on the server logs. Server logs contain what pages were accessed, along with the date and time and computer's IP address. We argue that server log data correspond to the section "market behaviour measures" in Aaker's (1996) brand equity ten. Web log metrics which can potentially be related with brand equity include the number of hits, the number of revisits and view time per page. Some respondents referred to such measures which can be useful to online marketers and can be incorporated into a holistic brand equity measurement system:

> Certainly there will be different factors that you may want to put into a brand equity system online. . . Maybe it will be easier to look at how often people come back to the site, how many sections of a site they look at. So, are they heavy users? Are they medium users? (Brand consultant 3).

> Just like in advertising we talk about share of mind and share of voice, I guess with the Net there are similar considerations of share of view (Academic 1).

Conclusion

This paper has sought to re-examine brand equity measurement in the light of the contemporary "brandscape", expanded to subsume branding on the Web. Aaker's (1996) guidelines on how to build a brand equity measurement system have been followed, and his brand equity ten has served as a starting point. The challenge was complementing this set of ten classical measures with new measures pertaining to the online space. A two-fold methodology has therefore been employed, involving a review of the literature on e-marketing and 16 (semi-structured) interviews with experts. Based on this, ten items have been identified to serve as additional measures to the traditional measures of brand equity ten. These are:

(1) Online brand experience.
(2) Interactivity.
(3) Customisation.
(4) Relevance.
(5) Site design.
(6) Customer service.
(7) Order fulfilment.
(8) The quality of brand relationships.
(9) Communities.
(10) Web site logs.

These dimensions, in conjunction with Aaker's brand equity ten represent a comprehensive set of measures that are sensitive to brand equity fluctuations, both online and offline. As such there are a variety of ways that brand practitioners can benefit from this tool.

'... Through including competing brands in an equity tracking monitor, managers should be better equipped to identify the severity of competitive threats in both the on and offline environment... '

By assessing the relative contribution of the traditional and Internet-specific measures, guidance is provided about the sources of a brand's well-being in an offline versus an online environment. The diagnostic, based on the 20 dimensions, can provide insights about which channel activities might further strengthen the brand. Adjustments to the brand's strategy can be more fully evaluated through this brand equity monitor to better integrate on and offline activity.

Through including competing brands in an equity tracking monitor, managers should be better equipped to identify the severity of competitive threats in both the on and offline environment. Appreciating the constituents of competitors' brand equity can aid a manager refine their integrated brand positioning strategy.

One of the attractions of the Internet is that short-sighted organisations regard it as an attractive channel to market an ever-expanding brand portfolio. This brand equity diagnostic provides guidance about the sources of different lines' wealth and can contribute to the decision about cutting back on an over-extended brand portfolio, or about refining the brand naming architecture.

In an era of corporate growth through acquisition related brands, managers are faced with the challenge of integrating new brands in a logical manner. The use of this equity monitor provides insights about potential synergistic areas of strength for the existing and newly acquired brands in the on and offline environment, enabling managers to better integrate the brands. Identifying dimensions where the brand shows competitive advantage will also help brand owners make decisions about brand extensions (i.e. pillars of strength can be leveraged through brand extensions).

One limitation of this study relates to the fact that interviews were conducted solely in the UK, possibly rendering some of the resulting dimensions culturally bound. As the experts had worked on brands that need the Internet to achieve global presence, one might assume that the dimensions are cross-culturally stable. However other researchers are encouraged to undertake replication studies in different parts of the world to assess whether these dimensions of brand equity are universal.

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Executive summary

This executive summary has been provided to allow managers and executives a rapid appreciation of the content of this article. Those with a particular interest in the topic covered may then read the article in toto *to take advantage of the more comprehensive description of the research undertaken and its results to get the full benefit of the material present.*

Brand marketers need to understand direct marketing and PR to succeed online

For years direct marketers argued that the core elements of their discipline could be used to create and build successful brands. Yet the ideas of interaction, dialogue rather than monologue and the search for consumer response got somewhat lost in the prosaic task of running successful direct marketing campaigns driven – as they are – by numbers and campaign performance. Brand marketers commanding huge advertising budgets sniffily dismissed direct marketing as "below-the-line", a bunch of tactics wrapped up to make a sort of marketing approach but not of real importance or relevance to brand building.

As computing technology developed direct marketing became more and more sophisticated. Greater amounts of data could be stored and manipulated to provide better profiles and improved targeting. The "holy grail" of real one-to-one marketing came closer as the technology allowed communications to change customer by customer. But there was still something missing – the direct marketer was still manipulating consumer data to increase the chance of the right message arriving on the doormat of the right customer. We were in control and the issue of image and impression seldom entered the marketer's mind – response rate, lifetime value, conversions and cost-per-sale were what mattered. The views of the 90 per cent who didn't respond were not important so long as we broke even or better.

Into this world arrived the Internet. Initially just another bit of new technology, albeit one that promised much in terms of communications and marketing, the Internet has changed how we think about marketing and the customer. Today we can see how the Internet has developed into a near perfect direct marketing medium – interactive, flexible, customer-controlled, dynamic and responsive.

Online brands are direct marketing brands

Brand marketers at first saw the Internet as another advertising medium. We bought space

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(directly or indirectly) to put up our brand message just as we had always done on the radio, on TV and in the printed media. Yet something told us this wasn't working – it irritated the Internet user, failed to have any noticeable impact on awareness or association and cost a lot of money. A new approach was needed if brands were to have the impact online that they have in the real world.

The challenge was to make the brand interactive – to engage with the consumer in a way we'd only ever dreamt of doing. And the lead was being given by organisations built using Internet-based business models – Amazon, eBay, Yahoo and America Online. These organisations brought little or no external baggage to their marketing. There was no received wisdom about the way marketing should be done and few sacred cows in need to despatch. The results were direct marketing brands in the true meaning of the word. The entirety of the business revolved round the engagement with the customer with the strength coming from the ability to collect and apply the information given by the consumer and knowledge about their actual purchase behaviour.

Gradually the techniques and ideas painstakingly tested by direct marketers in a real world situation took on a new life and new excitement in the virtual world. The consumer's response was instant (or at least very fast) and the business can equally respond quickly. The conversation between the consumer and the business became informed by the myriad of other conversations between the business and consumers – the idea of telling the consumer what others have bought is not new, the best seller flash always worked in printed catalogues. But linking that information to what the consumer has bought immediately following their purchase took direct marketing into a new, more dynamic realm.

Don't dump all you've learned about the brand

Despite this new interactive approach to branding online, Christodoulides and de Chernatony do not advise losing the traditional elements that support brand equity. For many brands (it could be argued, all brands) offline marketing remains important however this marketing is delivered. It is doubtful whether the success of some online brands would have happened if effective public relations and corporate communications plans were not employed.

What online branding requires is addition not replacement. We need to add the methods, approaches and systems that allow the brand to grow online to the existing methods of brand promotion developed in traditional brand management strategies. It would be as wrong to forget the basic principles of brand marketing as it is to see a Web site as just online advertising.

Nevertheless some of the ways in which the Internet has developed – online communities, the rapid spread of information and the 24/7 nature of the Web – require adaptations to our marketing approach. We need to recognise that conversations that in past times took place within a fairly closed group of friends now take place before millions online. Criticisms of our product or service are often shared online. We must respond to these problems by explaining our decisions and positions, by communicating online with these communities and by monitoring what is said about us.

Get stuck into selling, don't sit back and wait

Traditional brand marketing involved long periods of planning followed by relatively short periods of extensive action. We put up our message, sat back and waited to see whether it worked or not. The Internet changes how we should behave since it involves non-stop scanning of the market, flexibility and a real engagement with the market. We have to get stuck into selling our product, the company that owns the brand, the ideas behind the brand and everything about the brand. The Internet – and successful Internet marketing – require us to get involved, we can't sit back and wait for things to happen if we want our brand to succeed online.

Christodoulides and de Chernatony provide useful guidance by setting out important elements of online brand success. To apply these requires us to use the Internet, to develop direct marketing methods that we've previously dismissed as bad for the brand and to create public relations strategies that worry about what's being said online. These are exciting times for marketers and getting our marketing to work online is the biggest challenge since the invention of commercial TV.

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