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"i-Branding": developing the internet as a branding tool

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# “i-Branding”: developing the internet as a branding tool

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – To derive an applicable conceptual framework of branding via the internet form; to show how that framework can, by organising and integrating current knowledge, assist marketing planners in the development of successful internet-based branding strategies.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The conceptual framework presented here derives from a thorough analytical and critical review of the literature on branding in the conventional and virtual marketing environments.

**Findings** – There are three key themes in the mainstream branding literature, supplemented in the proposed framework by a fourth research stream self-evidently relevant to internet-based branding. It is clear that the resulting four main elements of the framework are strongly interrelated in the practice of brand management in the online environment.

**Practical implications** – The “Four Pillars of i-Branding” should be of intellectual interest and practical value to marketing planners and those advising them, providing a more systematic approach to the understanding and application of branding, online.

**Originality/value** – The literature of “i-Branding” is at present at a formative stage, with limited integration among its themes. The framework described here provides the basis for the rational formulation and implementation of branding strategies, applying internet-based tools to the tasks of marketing communication and customer relationship-building in particular.

**Keywords** Brands, Internet

**Paper type** Literature review

## Introduction

Traditionally, a brand is thought to evoke, in the customer’s mind, a certain personality, presence, and product or service performance (Aaker, 1991; Doyle, 1998). In addition to providing values, a brand can represent a substitute for information – a way for consumers to simplify the time-consuming process of search and comparison before deciding what to buy (Rowley, 2004; Bergstrom, 2000). The advent of the internet has made branding in that environment a more complex and dynamic challenge. Further, with the lack of sensory interaction online and fears over security, the creation of trust through the development of strong internet brands has become a critical context for marketers. Many online businesses are, therefore, searching for new internet brand strategies that might assist them in creating some distinctiveness while engaging their customers (Kenney and Curry, 1999).

Within this context the literature on internet branding (termed “i-Branding” in this paper) is currently in a formative stage, with little integration evident (Merisavo and Raulas, 2004; Ibeh *et al.*, 2005). There is no current framework to provide a means of integrating the i-Branding literature and thereby provide a more comprehensive understanding of how the various themes studied come together to facilitate the

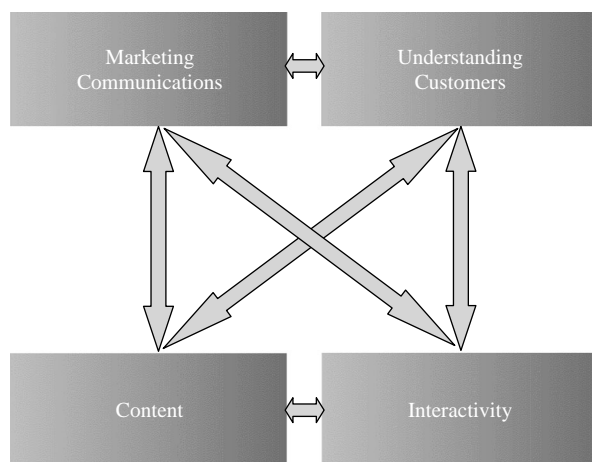


successful development of the internet as a branding tool. The aim of this paper is to conduct an extensive review of the extant literature on branding and internet branding, in order to develop an organising literature framework. The framework will relate to and be based upon three key themes inherent in the branding literature, which are also viewed as relevant within the internet context, and a fourth theme identified as highly relevant within the internet branding literature. This framework is described as “The Four Pillars of i-Branding” and is shown in Figure 1. The pillars in question provide an easily identifiable framework within which to organise, integrate and discuss the current thinking in relation to what is critical in developing the internet successfully as a branding tool.

The contribution of this paper is, therefore, to provide a timely intuitive framework for marketing practitioners, to further develop their skill and knowledge sets in this critical aspect of marketing today. Further, a relevant and potentially important contribution is the development of original insights, derived from the literature review within the framework, into how the integration of the Four Pillars will be integral to planning the development of the internet as a successful branding tool.

### Branding

Branding has been characterised as the process of creating value through the provision of a compelling and consistent offer and customer experience that will satisfy customers and keep them coming back (Aaker, 1991; De Chernatony and McDonald, 1992). As customers develop trust in the brand through satisfaction in use and experience, companies have the opportunity to start building relationships with them, strengthening the brand further and making it more difficult for competitors to imitate (Doyle, 1998). Brand leaders normally have the financial strength to fend off competition, and potential competitors are usually reluctant to enter the market if existing brands satisfy customers. Brands, therefore, enable a company to establish a unique identity and to increase the opportunity of attracting a large amount of repeat business (Ibeh *et al.*, 2005). Companies with a history of strong brands are likely to maintain greater control over the balance of power between them and their customers



**Figure 1.**  
The Four Pillars of  
i-Branding

(De Chernatony and McDonald, 1992), and command a higher market share and premium price against generic, unbranded, equivalents (Ibeh *et al.*, 2005). Strong, successful brands thus shift the competitive framework in the company's favour, giving it intangible values, difficult to replicate, with which to augment its more basic product, price and distribution benefits (Aaker, 1991).

In defining what a brand represents, De Chernatony and McDonald (1992) describe it as:

... an identifiable product augmented in such a way that the buyer or user perceives relevant unique added values which match their needs most closely. Furthermore, its success results from being able to sustain these added values in the face of competition.

This definition is seen to emphasise three aspects of a successful brand (Rowley, 2004):

- (1) a brand is dependant on customer perception;
- (2) perception is influenced by the added-value characteristics of the product; and
- (3) the added value characteristics need to be sustainable.

Marketers use branding to differentiate their product and service offerings from those of their competitors (Baker, 1996; Dibb *et al.*, 1997; Kotler, 1997). The brand incorporates a set of product or service features that are associated with that particular brand name (Baker, 1996) and identifies the product/service in the market (Cooke, 1996). The uniqueness of the brand is a crucial attribute and the brand itself plays a vital role in grounding marketing activity. Once created, brands need to be communicated and positioned for the relevant audience in the marketplace. In so doing, it is important to ensure that the brand's characteristics match consumer's expectations (Simoes and Dibb, 2001).

What is clear from this discussion is that creating successful branding involves more than just an effective core product or service. That must be augmented by other integral themes to create successful branding. Three key themes are highlighted in the branding literature within this context:

- (1) *Understanding the customer.* A brand is dependent on customer perception (O'Malley, 1991; De Chernatony and McDonald, 1992; Berry, 1993a; Simoes and Dibb, 2001; Jevons *et al.*, 2005).
- (2) *Marketing communications.* Once created, brands need to be communicated and positioned for the relevant audience in the marketplace (Berry *et al.*, 1988; Aaker, 1991; O'Malley, 1991; De Chernatony and McDonald, 1992; Coonan, 1993; Gregory, 1993; Schreuer, 2000; Simoes and Dibb, 2001).
- (3) *Ongoing interactions with customers.* Organisational processes should revolve around the creation, development, and protection of brand identity in an ongoing interaction with target customers with the aim of achieving lasting competitive advantages in the form of brands (Aaker, 1991; De Chernatony and McDonald, 1992; Urde, 1999; Schreuer, 2000; Simoes and Dibb, 2001; Jevons *et al.*, 2005; Paswan, 2005).

### Internet branding

Few would challenge the view that the internet has had a dramatic transformational impact on businesses. New technologies and emerging market trends have converged

to shift the balance of power from companies towards customers. Companies are finding that they are having to redefine their marketing and branding strategies due to the unique characteristics of the internet and its capacity to change old rules (Ibeh *et al.*, 2005). We have seen that a brand is generally thought to evoke, in the customer's mind, a certain personality, presence and product or service performance (Aaker, 1991; Doyle, 1998) and that the concept of a “brand” can be a way for consumers to simplify the time-consuming process of search and comparison before deciding what to buy (Rowley, 2004; Bergstrom, 2000). We have argued that the advent of the internet has added a more complex and dynamic element to branding strategy, particularly the implications for real-time interaction and marketplace crowding. Many online businesses are, thus, searching for new e-brand strategies that might assist them in creating some distinctiveness and engaging their customers (Kenney and Curry, 1999).

To enhance their prospects of achieving successful i-Branding, companies have been urged to embrace a number of strategies. These include:

- establishing an online brand as quickly as possible to gain first-mover advantages (Doyle, 1998);
- undergoing a systematic process of understanding, attracting, engaging, retaining and learning about target customers (Kierzkowski *et al.*, 1996);
- going beyond generating awareness for their sites to a greater focus on developing trust and relationships through an improved “click-to-order” ratio and repurchase rates (Court *et al.*, 2006; McGovern, 2000);
- building stronger relationships through targeting customers with unique messages, unique functionality, content and personalisation techniques (Ibeh *et al.*, 2005);
- delivering a quality product/service experience within a unique positioning concept and strong communications programme (Ibeh *et al.*, 2005);
- ensuring consistent delivery of the brand promise (Doyle, 1998; Court *et al.*, 2006).

Research suggests that, online, traditional attributes such as product selection and price drive brand equity and e-loyalty to a lesser degree than a positive customer online experience (AT Kearney Report, 2000). As functional benefits (e.g. product features and quality) become commodities that can be easily replicated, process and relationship benefits increasingly drive purchase decisions and word of mouth (McKinsey & Company, 2000). Ibeh *et al.* (2005), argue that these benefits are interlocking elements that reinforce one another to create a total, high-impact customer online experience, which is a key source of added value in the internet economy. The AT Kearney Report (2000) characterised the creation of a high-impact online customer experience as encompassing seven dimensions: building communities, making connectivity easy, delivering compelling content, customising the experience, embedding convenience, enhancing customer care, and communication.

### The Four Pillars of i-Branding

The literature of branding identifies understanding customers, communicating with them and maintaining ongoing interaction as essential to the augmentation of core products and services to create successful brands. The discussion of branding in the internet context reinforces the importance of these three themes. Table I allocates just less than 50 papers published between 1996 and 2006 to one of those themes.

**Table I.**  
Key themes in the  
i-Branding literature

Understanding customers	Interactivity	Marketing communications
Kierzkowski <i>et al.</i> (1996), Peppers and Rogers (1997), Slywotzky and Morrison (1997), Hof (1998), Goldsmith (1999), Probaker (2000), Court <i>et al.</i> (2006), McGovern (2000), Sterne and Cutler (2000), Teo and Tan (2002), Lin <i>et al.</i> (2004), Phippen (2004) and Marcolin <i>et al.</i> (2005)	Rheingold (1993), Berthon <i>et al.</i> (1996), Hoffman and Novak (1996), Kierzkowski <i>et al.</i> (1996), Fleming (1998), Ha and James (1998), Lincke (1998), Parsons <i>et al.</i> (1998), Ghose and Dou (1998), O’Keefe <i>et al.</i> (1998), Simeon (1999), McGovern (2000), Coyle and Thorson (2001), Holland and Menzel Baker (2001), Agarwal and Venkatesh (2002), Macias (2003), Preece <i>et al.</i> (2003) Dearstyn (2005), Ibeh <i>et al.</i> (2005), Marcolin <i>et al.</i> (2005), Pitta and Fowler (2005) and Hanson (2006)	Hoffman and Novak (1995), Philport and Arbitter (1997), MacMillan (1998), Watson <i>et al.</i> (1998), Pardun and Lamb (1999), Simeon (1999), Hanson (2000), May (2000), Timmers (2000), Quniton and Harridge-March (2003), Merisavo and Raulas (2004), Rowley (2004), Datta <i>et al.</i> (2005) and Ibeh <i>et al.</i> (2005)

Extending the discussion of branding to the internet environment introduces a fourth theme as being significant: content. The work of five more authors (AT Kearney Report, 2000; Ties and Ries, 2000; Griffith *et al.*, 2001; Palmer, 2002; Taylor and England, 2006) augments the sections of the studies in Table I that relate directly or indirectly to branding online.

These themes are developed into a framework for this paper which is dubbed “The Four Pillars of i-Branding”. The pillars in question are understanding customers, marketing communications, interactivity and content. The purpose of the framework is to integrate the pertinent internet branding literature, and thereby provide an intuitive tool for marketing practitioners to use in their thinking and planning with respect to the successful exploitation of the internet as a branding tool. The discussion which follows, highlights the strategic i-Branding opportunities achievable through understanding the integration of each of these four i-Branding “pillars” in turn.

*Pillar one: understanding customers*

Kierzkowski *et al.* (1996) state that to enhance their prospects of achieving successful i-Branding, companies need to understand online customers. This understanding provides the foundation for going beyond developing awareness of online offerings to a greater focus on developing the trust and relationships which form the basis of effective online branding (Court *et al.*, 2006; McGovern, 2000).

Within this i-Branding context, Lin *et al.* (2004) suggest that an enterprise can enhance its understanding of customers online by implementing an internet market segmentation approach. This approach could utilise various online methods to classify potential or actual online customers into groups which have similar requirements and characteristics, as follows:

- *Server-side data capture.* “Web analytics” is an evaluative online technique that uses easily obtained statistics, or “metrics” stored on server log files, to assess web site usage. Advanced web analytics software does not just collect such



information, but also uses it in conjunction with other data, such as demographics, customer profiles and subscription information.

- *Client-side data capture.* Central to this concept is the “cookie” a mechanism designed to compensate for the stateless nature of the http protocol that controls the transfer of hypertext documents. What is particularly interesting for marketers is that cookies can be utilised to identify the habits of a particular user.
- *Online surveys.* Technology has revolutionized the way in which surveys are administered – with the advent of the first e-mail surveys in the 1980s and web-based surveys in the 1990s. Online surveys offer real opportunities in the quest to better understand online customers, such as: global reach; flexibility; speed and timeliness; technological innovations; convenience for customers; ease of data entry and analysis; and low administration cost.
- *Databases.* Customer data gathered by companies online can be stored in databases, and analysed to provide a depth of information on individual customers that would be impossible, for many companies, to obtain by non-electronic means. The most important output of the integration of internet/database marketing is the enabling of effective customer relationship management.

After distinguishing customer groups, one or several are chosen as the enterprise’s target market and a specific marketing mix is developed in accordance with group characteristics, to establish a long-term, positive interaction that can meet the requirements of the target market (Lin *et al.*, 2004).

Segmentation is viewed by Goldsmith (1999) as a key facilitator, helping the marketer to understand more precisely the structure of the market and who the customer is or should be. This author takes the argument further, in stating that personalisation can play a role in this online segmentation approach, allowing marketers to precisely and cost effectively target segments and develop more one-to-one relationships. The prototype of personalisation is the world wide web. The power of the internet is its ability to tailor itself for each of its users. This may often be the only way companies marketing online can actually avoid competition solely on price, a development that turns their brands into commodities (Slywotzky and Morrison, 1997).

As a branding vehicle the internet, therefore, not only offers valuable segmentation opportunities, but actually takes the concept of understanding customers, and therefore, more precisely targeting them, to new levels (Probaker, 2000). This more personalised targeting is a critical opportunity offered in developing the internet successfully as a branding tool (Ibeh *et al.*, 2005).

#### *Pillar two: marketing communications*

Personalisation is also viewed as an integral element of marketing communications in the internet context. Online communication combines mass media’s reach with the personalisation inherent in two-way dialogue – previously only possible using personal forms of promotion. In this context, relationships are important at both individual and organizational level. Buttle (1996) argues that relationships with consumers are recognised to be at the heart of customer attraction and retention. Specifically, they allow customers to “spend time with brands” decreasing the search for information about alternatives (Newman and Staelin, 1972). Communication and consumer behaviour theories suggest that, when consumers have a preference for a brand, they are more keen

and willing to receive information from it and also to search for information about it. Repeated exposure potentially enhances brand attitudes by allowing the customer to process more information (Berger and Mitchell, 1989). The internet offers branding opportunities within the marketing communications context by creating three key enabling conditions, according to Rowley (2004):

- (1) *Presence*. After establishing a presence on the internet, one of the primary objectives is to attract a variety of interested parties to visit the company's online presence. A key benefit of attracting customers to company web sites is its positive relationship to brand equity when related to effective online strategies. Customers' perceptions of brands and companies can be positively changed by being attracted to an internet that is tailored to their specific wants and needs.
- (2) *Relationships*. These are developed when customers and organisations work together. As interaction increases, relationships become stronger and more sustainable. Rowley (2004) states that as organisations become acquainted with customers they may choose to differentiate the quality and extent of their offerings and services in favour of customers who are profitable. The internet facilitates a growth in company-customer interaction and mutual understanding by means of transaction, customer service interaction, feedback forms on web sites, user registration, and web analytic and cookie data collection. Companies can use the information gleaned to customise or personalise marketing communications (Rowley, 2004).
- (3) *Mutual value*. This can occur as companies and customers interact to create value in ways beneficial to both. Companies derive benefit and value from the opportunities to create more tailored and relevant communication messages about products and services which are of interest to the customers (Quniton and Harridge-March, 2003).

Traditionally, the focus in marketing communications has been on "promotion" and on the one-way transmission of messages. Media available for communication, such as television, radio, newspapers, magazines, newsletters, or direct marketing encourage this "push" approach (Rowley, 2004). However, they are linear in nature, following a scripted flow, and often subscribing implicitly to a one-to-many communication model in which a single promotion is sent by one source, and seen by many recipients without the opportunity for immediate feedback (Rowley, 2004). Clearly, the internet facilitates non-linear communication with a free flow and exchange of information, and the opportunity for two-way flows between companies and customers on a one-to-one or many-to-many (Hoffman *et al.*, 1995) basis. Online tools available to marketing communications planners in this environment include:

- *Company web sites*. An organisation's site is a promotional event in its own right. In effect the web site acts as a communicator of a company's value proposition and brand promise.
- *E-mail marketing*. E-mail can be used for various marketing communications purposes: sharing information about products and services; promoting them; building brand relationships; guiding customers to web sites; alerting customers and confirming order status. E-mail marketing can facilitate brand encounters



and deepen consumer-brand relationships with loyal customers, over and above seeking additional sales.

- *Viral marketing.* This is a set of online techniques that seek to exploit pre-existing social networks to produce exponential increases in brand awareness, through processes similar to the spread of an epidemic. Essentially, one person “infects” several people with an offer, who then spread it to several friends and acquaintances, until the entire virtual neighbourhood has been exposed. The global nature and ease of communication online makes the internet a powerful viral marketing tool.

Essentially, there is a power shift from online to offline, as customers gain control and their time becomes the asset that both they and the marketers need to understand, with customer needs sacrosanct. In this context, Rowley (2004) claims that information and not image is the main currency in online communication. However, researchers such as May (2000) suggest that the internet must be more than just an information medium. It also needs to offer entertainment value, because that is what online customers expect. The internet needs to be a place where stories are told and dialogues are initiated, as well as information being discovered. This is where strong brand perceptions can be developed online. Therefore, the development of the internet as a marketing communications medium requires an understanding of how information, entertainment and commerce can be melded together within an online marketing communications mix.

#### *Pillar three: interactivity*

It is clear that interaction with customers is central to realizing the benefits that the internet can provide in understanding customers and developing more personalised marketing communications. In creating this personalisation and providing the opportunity to create positive brand perceptions, customers need to be engaged within the online environment (Kierzkowski *et al.*, 1996). Parsons *et al.* (1998) describe interactivity as a central component in efforts to engage customers online, while Ibeh *et al.* (2005) assert that effective online branding requires customers to be targeted with unique personalisation techniques. Research has shown that high levels of interactivity online correlate with high levels of perceived customer personalisation (Ghose and Dou, 1998; O’Keefe *et al.*, 1998).

The internet is based on information and communication technologies that enable easy and rapid interaction between customers and companies in the search for information about products or consumer content, or in placing an order (Coyle and Thorson, 2001; Ha and James, 1998; Hoffman and Novak, 1996). Berthon *et al.* (1996) define interactivity as the facility for individuals and organisations to communicate directly with one another regardless of distance or time.

Coyle and Thorson (2001) view interactivity from a mechanical perspective. At a web site, individuals can interact with the medium itself, which is described as “machine interactivity”. This allows customers to control information presented with different levels of interactivity found (Coyle and Thorson, 2001). While people feel more personal control over information flows with high levels of interactivity (Klein, 2003; Peterman *et al.*, 1999) some researchers contend that it is not entirely positive for users; interactivity also requires them to invest processing resources in managing the

information flows (Ariely, 2000; Eveland and Dunwoody, 2002). While this would suggest the development of higher levels of personal and cognitive involvement in relation to a company by the customer visiting the site, there are other things to take into account. Thoughts may be favourable, unfavourable or even neutral (Sicilia *et al.*, 2005). This raises questions about content and the navigation process in interactive web sites. However, it is still generally contended in the literature that customers will react more positively when a web site has higher levels of interactivity (Ghose and Dou, 1998; O'Keefe *et al.*, 1998). The implications for i-Branding are obvious, with positive brand perception opportunities foremost.

However, while such research has generated useful insights into a new phenomenon and branding opportunity, it is equally important to assess firm behaviour in terms of efforts to facilitate interactivity with web site visitors. This is because the interactive communication process provides companies with a market-oriented mechanism to uncover and satisfy customer needs. Marcolin *et al.* (2005) explore three stages in the development of web site interactivity that practitioners should consider:

- (1) *First stage.* Being able to address the individual. Parsons *et al.* (1998) identify two sub-stages: attracting buyers to the site, and engaging them once they are there. It is obvious that marketing communications will be an integral element in attracting customers to interactive features, and that response is further facilitated by having links from other sites (e.g. banner advertising, affiliate sites). Attracting buyers from outside the web environment relies on traditional advertising and word-of-mouth to promote the URL (Agarwal and Venkatesh, 2002). Once potential customers are at the site, its navigational design and systems are key factors in the company's ability to engage visitors by guiding them to interactive features (Fleming, 1998; Parsons *et al.*, 1998).
- (2) *Second stage.* Gathering and remembering visitors' inputs: essentially. Understanding customers through their own contributions to the communication. Two broad categories of input characterise this stage: manual, direct from the customer, and system-generated. Both allow the company to learn about customers (Parsons *et al.*, 1998) while establishing dialogue (Berthon *et al.*, 1996). The most basic form of manual input is the click on a hyperlink, from which behavioural data can be tagged or remembered for later analysis (Marcolin *et al.*, 2005). Manual input could also consist of data captured in forms, dropdown boxes and videoconferencing. In contrast, the customer may or may not know that system-generated input is being collected. For example, a unique identifier such as a cookie can be passed back and forth between the web browser and the server without the buyer's knowledge, allowing database updates and retrievals to be completed anonymously (Marcolin *et al.*, 2005).
- (3) *Third stage.* Direct response to individual buyers, using data previously gathered and remembered via the site (Marcolin *et al.*, 2005). In effect, this stage represents what is ultimately offered to buyers. That offering is often available in real time at the web site, or it may be initiated as a delayed response, such as the delivery of a product or a reply to an e-mail (Lincke, 1998).

The degree of personalisation at this third stage can vary greatly (Lincke, 1998; Parsons *et al.*, 1998), with content and functionality delivered in a manner that is either the same for everyone or modified to reflect individual preferences and experiences,

as well as status and uniqueness (Holland and Menzel Baker, 2001). Importantly, Marcolin *et al.* (2005) show that the response stage can also trigger a secondary background process in which human intervention and action is involved. For example, a web-based order may initiate a personal telephone call for clarification of the details.

A range of online tools is available for the implementation of these three stages of interactivity development, such as:

- (1) *Blogs*. Short for “web logs” this term describes a hierarchy of text, images, media objects and data arranged chronologically, that can be viewed via an html browser. The centre of the hierarchy is a sequence of posts, each with a title, link, and description. These can be designed by a company to encourage additional posts from customers, building a rich interaction on specific topics.
- (2) *RSS Feeds*. Standing for “really simple syndication” this is a free internet service that allows customers to choose what they want to read, listen to or watch, and have it sent to them electronically. They subscribe to RSS feeds that interest them by clicking on the universal orange RSS button appearing at a rapidly growing number of web sites. Every time new content is added to a web site in this way, customers can receive relevant elements in their news feeder, and can browse the information at their leisure.
- (3) *Online Communities*. Alternatively called “virtual communities” these are collectives of geographically distributed individuals, bound by a common interest in exploiting internet technology to enable communication. In the marketing context, their benefit to marketers is the range of customer data that can be gathered, by observing behaviour within online communities.

The consensus in the reviewed literature is that the level of interactivity within the internet should positively affect an alert company’s online performance by increasing customers’ attention levels, facilitating the development of stronger brand relationships with them, and thereby increase satisfaction levels. These relationships will be important in realising the value of the internet as a branding tool (McGovern, 2000).

#### *Pillar four: content*

Ibeh *et al.* (2005), state that successful i-Branding is dependent upon targeting customers with unique messages, unique functionality and unique content. When customers enter an organization’s web site, they typically do so in order to find content on a given topic or to undertake a particular transaction. If a site is to effectively market products or services, and create effective i-Branding, then its design should allow such activities to be conducted in as straightforward a manner as possible (Taylor and England, 2006). The greatest difficulty that customers typically face in practice is actually locating the content they require or identifying the transaction they wish to undertake. The more difficult this is, the more likely it will be that customers develop negative brand perceptions online (Taylor and England, 2006).

The literature tentatively discusses various issues in this connection: web site design strategy (Wen *et al.*, 2001); web site searching (Kolesar and Galbraith, 2000); information search (Huang and Christopher, 2003); web-page flow (Berthon and Davies, 1999); web site content grouping (Rosenfeld and Morville, 1998). However, only a limited amount of research appears to have been completed in relation to the process

of actually designing corporate web sites in a way that allows ease of content identification and access. Neilson (2000) remarked that a common fundamental error of web design is to structure a site to mirror the way in which the company is structured rather than to match the users' tasks and their views of the information space. Research conducted very recently by Taylor and England (2006) addressed this failing by identifying what the "key" site content is, from the customer's point of view, so that web design can allow them to navigate there with the minimum of effort. In essence, they contended that the aim of web site content grouping should be that related or similar material is placed close together in the navigational structure of the site, whenever possible.

Group relationships within site content can be identified, according to Taylor and England (2006), by asking the question: "If a web site user is interested in a particular item of information/transaction, what similar or related items of information/transactions would they also be interested in?". In other words, the relevant relationships can be identified by considering what the user requires, in addition to a particular item of information or a particular transaction, in order to be fully informed about a topic or procedure. This means that content ranking and grouping can be effectively developed only by utilising the experience and knowledge of marketing and sales staff within the company, asking typical target customers, or analysing web site traffic (Heinen, 1996), to ascertain where customers go and what they want. Web designers must adopt this version of normal customer orientation in developing the content ranking and grouping processes involved.

While content grouping is clearly a key concern, Auger (2005) points to certain other site design features which are important within the content pillar of the i-Branding framework. The sophistication of a web site's design, in particular, has been a controversial issue in the e-commerce literature. Research on the "graphical user interface" clearly demonstrates that graphics do affect the behaviour and brand perceptions of users. For example, there is evidence to suggest that graphics and multimedia can enrich the discovery process (McCormick *et al.*, 1987). Further, Ives (1982) had earlier proposed that multimedia could be an effective medium to inform or persuade. More recently, Griffith *et al.* (2001) suggested that the utilisation of multimedia tools can help to stimulate higher levels of users' brand involvement with web sites.

However, there is also recent evidence to suggest that unduly sophisticated and graphics-intensive web sites can create negative brand perceptions among users. The exact nature of the problem would appear to revolve around the long delays associated with downloading graphics and other sophisticated features such as Java "applets" (Rose and Straub, 2001). Indeed, Shneiderman (1998) proposed that users do not like to wait for more than a few seconds. This important design issue is best captured in the concept of "response time" which has long been regarded as a critical design principle in computer and electronic environments (Neilson, 1993). There is, therefore, a trade-off between how sophisticated and appealing a site may be to users and the time it takes for it to download, which may be a particularly especially important challenge for the designers of business-to-consumer sites (Palmer, 2002).

### **Integrating the Four Pillars**

The Four Pillars framework cannot not by itself show how to develop the internet successfully as a branding tool. It is clear from reviewing the available

literature that integration of the Four Pillars will be critical in planning i-Branding campaigns.

Marketing planners need to carefully consider the strategic branding opportunities achievable through the integration of these Four Pillars of i-Branding. This is an essential consideration, which will be highlighted in the following discussion.

The understanding customers pillar integrates with the marketing communication branding pillar in the development of the internet as a branding tool. With the power shift online from companies to customers (Rowley, 2004), understanding their individual as opposed to group needs becomes essential. Allied to this, the ability of the internet to facilitate non-linear communication and two-way personalised interaction provides opportunities for highly targeted communications online. However, this personalised communication approach needs to be firmly based on an understanding of online customers (Goldsmith, 1999). Such initiatives can provide the opportunity to build relationships with customers, providing the basis for positive brand relationships (Newman and Staelin, 1972; Berger and Mitchell, 1989).

E-mail marketing communications has gained a bad press, with the issue of “spamming” engendering anger among recipients and leading to the development of filtering tools to prevent unwanted e-mails. Companies now have to gain permission from customers to e-mail them without the threat of damaging brand perceptions. However, there is a further element to this argument. Planners will need to understand what customers do value from regular e-mail communications, and personalise their e-mail communications to individual preferences (Merisavo and Raulas, 2004). If they do not, the empowered online customer will send the e-mail to the recycle bin. Viral marketing is a highly effective internet marketing communications tool (Datta *et al.*, 2005), but will succeed in its objectives only if companies understand their online customers and provide offerings that can deliver better value than those from competitors. Customers will then have positive things to say online – which will spread with the “viral” rapidity that the online environment makes possible. Properly integrating customer understanding and marketing communications, therefore, permits a more targeted and personalised approach to online marketing campaigns. Companies will then benefit from i-Branding opportunities delivered through the creation of more tailored and relevant communication messages about products and services that are of interest to potential customers (Quniton and Harridge-March, 2003). Conversely, effective online marketing communication will help to attract and retain customers, and offer the attendant opportunities to better understand them by utilising client-side and server-side data-capture tools, online surveys and the like.

The branding literature highlights the importance of creating ongoing interactions with customers in the development of relationships and positive brand perceptions (Newman and Staelin, 1972; Urde, 1999). In the terminology of the Four Pillars framework, this implies integration of the understanding customers and interactivity pillars. Interactive online tools provide a means of engaging customers, and attracting them back to a web site on a regular basis. Return visits can facilitate increased understanding of customers, leading to enhanced relationships (Court *et al.*, 2006) which form the basis of positive “brand immersion” for customers (Newman and Staelin, 1972; Berger and Mitchell, 1989). Specific internet-based interactive tools can be useful in achieving increased understanding of online customers. For example, blogs, which may be third-party creations or be hosted at the company web site, offer

companies a chronological record of customers' views. RSS feeds allow companies to ascertain which topics interest customers, by their choice of the content they opt to receive from companies. Online communities are effectively focus groups which, if located at the company's web site, provide an ongoing source of rich information on customers and their specific attitudes, interests and opinions. Companies can thereby integrate the interactivity and customer understanding pillars of the i-Branding framework to create detailed and relevant customer profiles.

Correspondingly, such customer-intelligence gathering tools as client and server-side data capture can also be integrated with interactive tools to identify individual customers as they interact with the company at the web site. The resulting increase in knowledge about the customer base provides the foundation for companies to go beyond developing awareness for their online offerings to a greater focus on developing the trust and relationships which form the basis of effective internet branding (Court *et al.*, 2006; McGovern, 2000). Interactive tools will be critical in this relational context, allowing personalised interactions to be created based upon a developed understanding of customers, a critical factor in realising value from the internet as a branding tool (Ibeh *et al.*, 2005).

The marketing communications and interactivity i-Branding pillars naturally have a particularly close relationship. For example, while RSS feeds allow customers to choose the type of regular information they want to receive from a company web site, they also effectively present planners with the opportunity to develop a subtle kind of marketing communications approach, on a permission basis, and relevant to the empowered online customer. Similarly, while viral marketing is primarily treated as a marketing communications tool, it depends on personal interactivity to ensure its spread. Continual online value creation will encourage customers to act as surrogate salespeople, spreading positive messages and creating positive brand perceptions (Datta *et al.*, 2005).

There is also integration between the understanding customers and content pillars of the i-Branding framework. Content online must be based upon what the customer requires and not on how the company is structured (Taylor and England, 2006). It needs to reflect customer preferences related to navigation through the site and interest in the content provided. Targeting customers with unique online content is viewed as being essential in the creation of effective internet branding (Ibeh *et al.*, 2005). This objective can be achieved only if companies understand their customers' content needs. Relevance will engage potential customers and attract them back to the site, providing planners with opportunities to gather yet more customer intelligence (Kierzkowski *et al.*, 1996).

Further, there is integration between the content and interactivity pillars. Content that is interactive and engaging will motivate consumers to return to a site and interact more deeply with the brand (Griffith *et al.*, 2001; Taylor and England, 2006). This allows planners to foster ongoing relationships that will allow positive brand associations to develop (Newman and Staelin, 1972; Berger and Mitchell, 1989). Such interactive tools as blogs and RSS feeds need to offer relevant and engaging content. Hanson (2006) found that the "best" authors of blogs are subject-matter experts who have a personal stake in the topic at hand. They possess the insights and ability to create blog content which can attract and engage customers. Further, the navigational design and systems component of content affects the company's ability to engage the user, by guiding them to interactive features and also via the experiences they have there (Fleming, 1998; Parsons *et al.*, 1998).



Finally, the communication and content pillars of the framework integrate in the sense that engaging content can allow a web site to act as a positive communication tool in its own right or a viral campaign to create surrogate salespeople who extol the virtues of a company's web site (Datta *et al.*, 2005). Planners should also recognise that simple e-mail marketing campaigns need to have an engaging content. Merisavo and Raulas (2004) contend that the strategic focus of e-mail marketing should be on creating brand encounters, and deepening consumer-brand relationships with loyal customers, not just on seeking additional sales. The content of e-mail marketing communications will be crucial in achieving this.

## Conclusion

This paper has offered an organising framework within which marketing planners can review and integrate the lessons from the literature of i-Branding. It is built upon three key themes from within the general branding literature, supplemented by a fourth that is particularly relevant to the internet context.

### *Implications for marketing practitioners and academicians*

It is clear that the four identified “pillars” of i-Branding need to be carefully integrated in the development of internet branding strategy. For example, it is only through understanding customers that content can be designed that is relevant and engaging enough to encourage interaction. Content can also become highly engaging if it incorporates interactive features that are relevant to target customers. Interactive content furthermore gives customers control, which is a critical factor given the capacity of the internet to enhance customer empowerment.

Interactivity, among customers themselves and between customers and companies, allows planners to gather rich intelligence about the wants and needs of their customers. Sound customer intelligence allows planners to exploit to create more positive brand equity in target markets, and allows targeted marketing communications to be sent to customers who value relevant communications amongst the annoying untargeted annoying noise experience on a daily basis.

Each component of the Four Pillars of i-Branding framework becomes an effective driver of branding success through this integration. Marketing planners should aim to develop strategies that allocate resources to the acquisition of the internet tools discussed in this paper, and their integrated use within the overall framework of i-Branding. It is important that their potential interactions with one another are taken into consideration in choosing the i-Branding initiatives to be channelled into the creation of positive online brand equity. Critically, marketers need to continually monitor their offline branding strategy, to ensure consistency and effectiveness throughout their branding activities online and offline.

By approaching i-Branding in this integrated and organised manner, planners should be able to ensure that their internet campaigns support their general branding strategy, rather than detracting from it. i-Branding can deliver real value to customers, beyond revenue generation. Marketers can begin to create added value around their core products and services, which will in turn permit the development of more positive brand associations and offer protection against increasing commoditisation.

*Suggestions for further research*

This paper has presented the Four Pillars of i-Branding framework as an important and relevant conceptual tool for thinking marketing practitioners and pragmatic academics.

The interactions between the pillars are presented as the fuel needed to lift i-Branding to a new level in the virtual world. Future research could usefully explore these interactions in various business contexts, so that transferable knowledge can be built in relation to their integration into specific i-Branding strategies and campaigns. The author is developing case studies of the application of the Four Pillars framework to firms in the food industry. It is hoped that the findings and lessons will generate new insights into how the internet can be effectively developed as a powerful tool of branding strategy.

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