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Managing i-branding to create brand equity

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Managing i-branding to create brand equity

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Abstract

Purpose – Given the emergent nature of i-branding as an academic field of study and a lack of applied research output, the aim of this paper is to explain how businesses manage i-branding to create brand equity.

Design/methodology/approach – Within a case-study approach, seven cases were developed from an initial sample of 20 food businesses. Additionally, utilising secondary data, the analysis of findings introduces relevant case examples from other industrial sectors.

Findings – Specific internet tools and their application are discussed within opportunities to create brand equity for products classified by experience, credence and search characteristics. An understanding of target customers will be critical in underpinning the selection and deployment of relevant i-branding tools. Tools facilitating interactivity – machine and personal – are particularly significant.

Research limitations/implications – Future research positioned within classification of goods constructs could provide further contributions that recognise potential moderating effects of product/service characteristics on the development of brand equity online. Future studies could also employ the i-branding conceptual framework to test its validity and develop it further as a means of explaining how i-branding can be managed to create brand equity.

Originality/value – While previous research has focused on specific aspects of i-branding, this paper utilises a conceptual framework to explain how diverse i-branding tools combine to create brand equity. The literature review integrates fragmented literature around a conceptual framework to produce a more coherent understanding of extant thinking. The location of this study within a classification of goods context proved critical to explaining how i-branding can be managed.

Keywords Internet marketing, Electronic commerce, Brands, Brand equity, Interpersonal communications, Marketing communications

Paper type Research paper



Introduction

The internet is precipitating radical marketing-driven changes to the structures and cultures of successful businesses (Hoffman and Novak, 1996; Porter, 2001; Harridge-March, 2004; Pitta and Fowler, 2005). Applications such as e-mail and web sites are key constituents of internet marketing delivery to customers (Merisavo and

Raulas, 2004; Rowley, 2004; Taylor and England, 2006). Within these applications internet adoption for marketing includes specific tools, including for example web sites, e-mail marketing, digital advertising, web analytics, viral marketing and brand communities (Sterne and Cutler, 2000; Phippen, 2004; Rowley, 2004; Datta *et al.*, 2005; Evans and Mathur, 2005; Marcolin *et al.*, 2005; Ha, 2008; Jensen, 2008). Combining these tools provides opportunities for businesses to brand utilising the internet. However within the internet branding context (referred to as i-branding in this paper) the literature is formative and fragmented, resulting in a lack of understanding relating to *how* these tools combine and the impact upon marketing strategy (Merisavo and Raulas, 2004; Ibeh *et al.*, 2005).

Given the emergent nature of i-branding as an academic field of study and a lack of applied research output (Barwise and Farley, 2005), the aim of this paper is to explain *how* businesses manage i-branding to create brand equity. While previous research has focused on specific aspects of i-branding, this paper utilises a conceptual framework to explain how diverse i-branding tools *combine* to create brand equity. Related to the development of this study, an additional contribution relates to the integration of fragmented literature around the conceptual framework to produce a more coherent understanding of extant thinking. A further contribution is the location of this study within a classification of goods context. Classification of goods is widely contended to have a moderating effect on how consumers interact with brands online and how businesses respond strategically (Peterson *et al.*, 1997; Li and Gery, 2000; Poon and Joseph, 2001; Vijayasarathy, 2002). However, no extant studies have considered exploring i-branding from the classification of goods perspective.

One such classification construct is products classified by experience, credence and search characteristics – dependent upon customers buying process (Darby and Karni, 1973; Nelson, 1970, 1974). In this study the food industry represents an important focus for the research. Emerging food market trends are presenting significant opportunities for food businesses to brand online, marketing products classified by experience and credence characteristics (Grunert and Ramus, 2005; Ramus and Nielsen, 2005; Canavan *et al.*, 2007). Given the relevance of the food context, a case study methodology was adopted to explain how pragmatic food businesses managed i-branding to create brand equity. From the perspective of products classified by search characteristics, the study introduces case examples that consider how pragmatic businesses from relevant industries manage i-branding to create brand equity. The study presents relevant implications at both applied and theoretical levels. The next sections of the paper develop a discussion on branding and internet branding.

Internet branding

Contemporary definitions of branding transcend the simple transaction between the brand organisation and consumers, by including aspects of brand and relationship intangibles such as customer loyalty and preference (Haigh and Knowles, 2004). Simply speaking, a brand can be all the promises that a product or marketing makes (Blackett, 2004). Strong brands can improve customer loyalty and therefore generate higher revenues in the long-term (Keller, 2003), allow higher price premiums (Court *et al.*, 2002) and increase the market value of the firm, since the brand name is often worth more than the total value of the company itself (Kohli and Thakor, 1997; Kapferer, 1998; Kay, 2006). Within this context Aaker (1996) considers a brand to be an

asset, developing the concept of brand equity. Salzer-Morling and Strannegard (2004) present brand equity as consisting of four major asset categories:

- (1) brand name awareness;
- (2) brand loyalty;
- (3) perceived quality; and
- (4) brand associations.

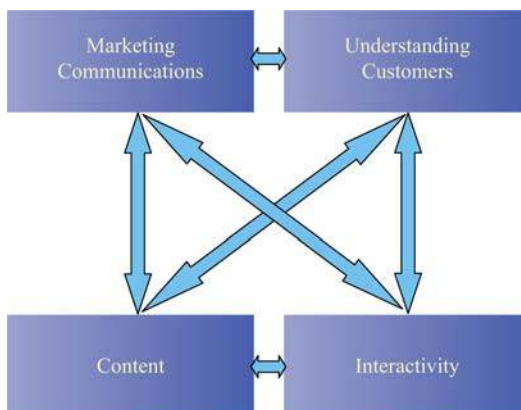
These assets create value for the brand owner and the customer.

Increasingly businesses are finding that they have to redefine their marketing and branding strategies due to the unique characteristics of the internet and its capacity to change old rules (Harridge-March, 2004; Ibeh *et al.*, 2005). However, there is an evident gap between extant i-branding thinking and applicability to practice. Addressing a need for more focused and integrated thinking Simmons (2007) developed a conceptual framework entitled “the four pillars of i-branding” (see Figure 1).

The conceptualisation provides a framework for integrating formative and fragmented i-branding literature underpinning the research in this paper. Each of the pillars are now utilised to help develop this literature.

Understanding customers

Harridge-March (2006) notes that well-known brands are more likely to succeed online as consumers’ risk potential is reduced from “knowing” the brand and its reputation offline. Appearing to contradict this, Wilde *et al.* (2004) examined dimensions of reputation or brand image to measure e-tail (online) image. The authors found that e-tailer reputation and branding are merely additional attributes to institutional factors – including online attributes such as core product and service. These institutional factors would appear to represent the e-tailer’s reputation/brand image online (Wilde *et al.*, 2004). In this context Da Silva and Alwi (2006) suggest that consumers may use more cognitive (thought/reasoning) evaluations than affective (feeling/emotions) online. It is apparent that consumers feel more reassured evaluating brands online on more specific attributes, with risk and trust contributing factors. Rafiq and Fulford (2005) state that customers who trust – and are loyal towards – a



Source: Simmons (2007)

Figure 1.
Four pillars of i-branding
conceptual framework

given brand are more likely to interact more positively with that brand, creating opportunities to develop brand equity.

Harridge-March (2006) contends that a critical component in building trust online is the understanding of actual and potential customers. The rise of personalisation within this has become almost a brand in itself when considering marketing online. Internet adoption has been identified by various researchers as providing a cost-effective means for businesses online to generate required data, in order to be able to segment their customers and understand their various needs and wants – particularly within a one-to-one personalised marketing context (Sterne and Cutler, 2000; Whitman *et al.*, 2001; Cunningham, 2002; Phippen, 2004; O'Leary *et al.*, 2004; Evans and Mathur, 2005).

This more personalised understanding of customers is viewed as a critical opportunity in developing the internet as a channel to create brand equity (Ibeh *et al.*, 2005). In achieving this there are various online tools that can be utilised, such as:

- server-side data capture – web analytics (Sterne and Cutler, 2000; Phippen, 2004);
- client-side data capture – cookies (Whitman *et al.*, 2001; Cunningham, 2002);
- online surveys (Evans and Mathur, 2005); and
- database marketing (O'Leary *et al.*, 2004).

Marketing communications

Personalisation is also viewed as being an integral element of internet marketing communications. From a branding perspective, online communication combines mass media's reach with the personalisation inherent in two-way dialogue – previously only possible using personal promotion (Simmons, 2007). Consumers' perceived risk, as well as being a critical i-branding factor in relation to understanding customers online, is attracting increasing interest from the marketing communications perspective. Rogers (1995), studying diffusion of innovation, noted how internet marketers provide communications online in order to mediate consumer perceptions of risk. More recent work by Andrews and Boyle (2008) also found that marketers can use communications online to mediate consumer risk perceptions. Their findings suggest that consumers perceive online security technologies as being easily compromised. In this context it was the reputation/branding efforts of businesses – through communications – that were critical.

This brings the discussion back to Wilde *et al.* (2004), who examined dimensions of reputation or brand image to measure e-tail (online) image. These are additional attributes to institutional factors representing specific online attributes, with consumers employing cognitive (thought/reasoning) evaluations to a greater extent than affective (feeling/emotions) online (Da Silva and Alwi, 2006). Within this context, Rowley (2004) reveals that information and not image is the main branding currency in online communication. It could be argued that the balance between the two will vary based upon the instrumental value of marketing communications for more functional product/service offerings, or more hedonic immersive aspects for more experiential product/services (see Van Der Heijden and Verhagen, 2004).

The rise of Web 2.0 facilitates non-linear communication, a free flow and exchange of information and the opportunity for two-way flows between businesses and customers as well as between customers on a one-to-one or many-to-many basis (Phippen, 2004; Rowley, 2004; Pitta and Fowler, 2005). Traditional “push” communications follow a

scripted flow within 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). Simmons (2008) discusses social network marketing (SNM) opportunities with viral communications – positive and negative – taking place 24/7 globally on social network web sites such as MySpace, and through the burgeoning blogosphere. Importantly communications derived from such SNM activities can be harnessed by marketers in creating positive brand equity (Simmons, 2008).

Interactivity

The internet is based upon information and communication technologies that enable easy and rapid interaction between customers and businesses (Hoffman and Novak, 1996; Ha and James, 1998; Coyle and Thorson, 2001). Recent definitions of internet-related interactivity are focused on concepts such as active/user control, two-way communication and synchronicity (Liu and Shrum, 2002; McMillan and Hwang, 2002). The meaning of interactivity in this paper is related to the creation of brand equity utilising the internet. This interactivity is viewed as critical in achieving the high levels of perceived customer personalisation contended to be a critical influence on brand equity online (Marcolin *et al.*, 2005; Ibeh *et al.*, 2005). In achieving this personalisation and related opportunities to build brand equity, the issues of risk and trust online present themselves again. Research has revealed that the level of internet interactivity is directly and positively correlated to consumer perceptions of trust (Merrilees and Fry, 2003; Sicilia *et al.*, 2005; Wu and Chang, 2005; Canavan *et al.*, 2007).

Coyle and Thorson (2001) view interactivity from a mechanical perspective. Machine interactivity is the extent to which users can participate in modifying the form and content of a mediated environment in real time (Wu and Chang, 2005). This allows customers to control information presented, with different levels of interactivity found (Coyle and Thorson, 2001). Really Simple Syndication (RSS) feed, for example, is a free internet service that allows consumers to choose what they want to read, listen to and watch and have it sent to them electronically. RSS differs from e-mail newsletters in that the consumer has the power to be almost infinitely selective. Consumers can visit web sites of interest customising the content they want to receive, while secure in the knowledge that they will not receive any additional or irrelevant information.

From another perspective Berthon *et al.* (1996) consider interactivity from a more personal context – representing the facility for individuals and organisations to communicate directly with one another, regardless of distance or time. Within these contexts consumers are empowered online, being able to generate content (user-generated content; see Simmons, 2008) and through the rise of online communities having the ability to interact with others around brands – negatively and positively (Pitta and Fowler, 2005). The personal context of interactivity incorporates the rise of social networking (e.g. MySpace, Facebook) blogs and brand community sites.

Content

While businesses have varying goals online, a key influence on their success (also discussed within the other three pillars) will depend on the level of satisfaction and trust customers feel towards the internet presence (Lee, 2002; Law and Bai, 2008). Szymanski and Hise (2000) revealed that convenience, site design and financial security were important areas in consumer assessments of trust and satisfaction online. Additionally the provision of product-related information with interactive elements, were found to be important contributors to consumer perceptions of trust and

satisfaction online (Ballantine, 2005; Wu and Chang, 2005). Law and Bai (2008) found that web site quality features were positively correlated to customer satisfaction, which in turn was significantly correlated to brand equity. In researching web site quality, content and ease of use attributes have emerged as critical elements (Bevan, 2001; Palmer, 2002; Neilsen, 2003).

A limited amount of research appears to have been completed in relation to the process of actually designing web sites in a way that allows ease of content identification by customers. Neilsen, 2000 commented that a common fundamental error of web site design is to structure a site to mirror the way in which the business is structured, rather than to mirror the users' tasks and their views of the information space. Research conducted by Taylor and England (2006) has attempted to address this, by identifying what important web site content is for customers and to enable these to be navigated with the minimum of effort. Effective web site content grouping occurs when related or similar web site content – wherever possible – is placed closely together in the navigational structure of a site (Taylor and England, 2006).

An interesting area of research in the content context resides within the interactivity construct. While current thinking is focusing upon the more personal context of interactivity – especially exhibited in online social networks – machine-based interactivity (Coyle and Thorson, 2001) is an area that represents considerable branding relevance online. As discussed, web site quality features have been positively correlated with customer satisfaction, which in turn was related to brand perceptions. Ghose and Dou (1998) were amongst the first researchers to reveal a relationship between perceived quality of web sites and the role of interactivity.

Within this context Lim and Dubinsky (2004) identify several forms of machine interactivity that are relevant, including downloading, e-form inquiry, order status tracking, and customer comment facilities. However to create branding opportunities online there needs to be “flow”. Csikszentmihalyi (1975) originally defined flow as a holistic experience that individuals feel when they act with total involvement. It has also been defined by Hoffman and Novak (1996) as a state occurring during network navigation that is characterised by a seamless sequence of responses facilitated by machine-interactivity, is intrinsically enjoyable, is accompanied by a loss of self-consciousness, and is self-reinforcing. Hoffman and Novak (1996) conceptualise flow online from a navigation perspective determined by high levels of skill and control, a high level of challenge and arousal, focused attention, and enhanced by interactivity and tele-presence.

Dynamic nature of the “four pillars”

The literature discussion presented within the four pillars conceptual framework reveals aspects relating to each pillar that appear to be related. With the development of the framework, Simmons (2007) proposed that each of the four i-branding pillars will only contribute to internet branding through interaction with other pillars. The potential interactions with other pillars need be considered in order to ascertain i-branding opportunities in the creation of brand equity. By considering each of the four pillars in the development of i-branding strategies – particularly how their interactions relate to opportunities for creating brand equity – businesses can begin to understand how their internet efforts can support their online and offline branding activities (Simmons, 2007).

With the emergent nature of i-branding research and a lack of specific and integrated thinking regarding applicability to practice (Merisavo and Raulas, 2004;

Barwise and Farley, 2005; Ibeh *et al.*, 2005 Simmons, 2007), the four pillars framework attempts to provide a conceptual basis for addressing these issues. The aim of this study was to utilise the conceptual framework as a focus for explaining how businesses manage i-branding to create brand equity. In addressing this aim the researchers noted relevance in relation to classification of goods constructs.

Classification of goods context

Research has been conducted that assesses internet marketing from the perspective of congruence or fit between product and channel (De Figueiredo, 2000; Jahng *et al.*, 2000). With related issues relating to tangibility (Peterson *et al.*, 1997; Melian-Alzola and Padron-Robaina, 2006), classification of goods constructs could provide a relevant platform for studies of internet marketing related areas such as i-branding (see Poon and Joseph, 2001; Vijayasathay, 2002). One such classification construct classifies products characterised by experience, credence and search qualities (Darby and Karni, 1973; Nelson, 1970; 1974).

Food products can be classified as having experience (e.g. product can be evaluated by customer only after the purchase) and credence characteristics (e.g. difficult/or impossible to evaluate by an average customer – whether an orange was organically produced). While such characteristics are viewed as a potential constraint to utilisation of the online marketing channel, changes in food market trends have made them significant in leveraging the internet to create brand equity. Food consumers when forming brand quality expectations will utilise both intrinsic and extrinsic cues available at the point of contact (Grunert *et al.*, 2000). The intrinsic cues referring to physical characteristics of the food product are typically not – or only to a limited degree – available when shopping for food online (Grunert and Ramus, 2005). Extrinsic cues – referring to everything else – may have distinct advantages for food products online. This is due to the internet's ability to tailor more of the information communicated in a way that is individualised in relation to individual consumers' needs (Klein, 1998; Simmons, 2007). Degeratu *et al.* (2000) suggest that extrinsic cues that are effectively transmitted online can have more significance in relation to consumer perceptions than intrinsic cues, even if these are available in the context of product images.

Taking a different stance, Peterson *et al.* (1997) report that the potential for consumer marketing via the internet is greatest when the value proposition offered is intangible. While not aligned intuitively to the food industry context online, an increasing number of food products have intangible value propositions in the health, provenance and production method contexts, for example. This has subsequently elevated the internet as a potentially attractive branding channel for food products exhibiting a pronounced connotative context (such as speciality/organic foods), as well as lower value food products (Evans and Wurster, 1999; Grunert and Ramus, 2005; Ramus and Nielsen, 2005). The experience and credence characteristics of food can therefore be potentially leveraged by food businesses online to create brand equity.

Search products (e.g. product can be evaluated by customers before purchase) have attracted most attention from the popular press and media in relation to the online environment. This is particularly true for those products that are intangible. Intangible search products such as software and, increasingly, music can accelerate distribution and provide instant gratification. Tangible search products – while having a perceived edge online over more tangible experience and credence products – face similar challenges relating to narrowing the sensory gap between products and online customers, and shortening time intervals between online order and fulfilment

(Vijayasathy, 2002). However, as with food products exhibiting experience/credence characteristics, marketing tangible search products online requires consideration of market trends in order to probe potential i-branding opportunities.

Research aim/methodology

The aim of this paper was to utilise the four pillars conceptual framework as a focus for explaining how businesses manage i-branding to create brand equity. In achieving the paper's aim and in view of the formative nature of this field of enquiry, an exploratory research approach was adopted. The research was focused on an area of enquiry where phenomena are not well understood and interrelationships between phenomena are not well known. This made an inductive-based qualitative research approach most appropriate (Eisenhardt, 1989; Eisenhardt, 1991; Parkhe, 1993; Perry and Coote, 1994; Riege and Perry, 2000; Carson *et al.*, 2001). Within this wider methodological context a case study approach was selected to address the research aim. Case study research is suited to areas that require inductive approaches where accepted principles and constructs have not been established or are clearly inadequate (Perry, 1998). Additionally the aim of the study was to obtain an explanation of particular situations and the meaning of practitioners' rich experiences (Gilmore and Carson, 1996) – more suited to case study research (Morris and Wood, 1991; Robson, 2002). In order to develop relevant cases to address the research aim the researchers first selected a wider sample of food businesses to conduct in-depth interviews with.

In-depth interviews with 20 food businesses

Twenty food businesses were selected using a purposive sampling approach, which was based upon their perceived value in providing insight appropriate within the context of the research aim. Sampling criteria are presented in Appendix 1 with a rationale provided for each criterion. Appendix 2 presents these food businesses in relation to their location, size and nature of business.

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with managers responsible for internet marketing activities within the 20 food businesses. Discussion areas were based upon the four pillars conceptual framework (Simmons, 2007). However to focus interviews, themes were developed to guide the researchers towards ensuring that respondents addressed key areas relevant in relation to their management of i-branding to create brand equity.

These themes representing specific internet tools/applications critical to i-branding, are inherent components of the four pillars of i-branding conceptual framework (see Simmons, 2007) and the various strands of literature organised around it in this paper. The themes were utilised in conjunction with the brand equity concept to analyse interview transcripts developed from interviews with the 20 food businesses. The researchers made reference to the concept of brand equity as developed by Aaker (1996), relating to brands as assets creating value for the brand owner and customer. Salzer-Morling and Strannegard (2004) built on this presenting brand equity as consisting of four major asset categories:

- (1) brand name awareness;
- (2) brand loyalty;
- (3) perceived quality; and
- (4) brand associations.

Analysing the interview transcripts the researchers probed for how food businesses were utilising the internet (with reference to i-branding themes in Appendix 3) to address these asset categories.

Case study development

1268

Building upon the research conducted with the 20 food businesses, a smaller sample were subsequently selected – from the 20 – for inclusion within case studies. The case study selection procedure was based upon the depth and richness of information that selected food businesses provided in the 20 interviews, which was relevant to explaining *how* i-branding was managed to create brand equity. The literature provides no precise guidelines as to how many cases should be chosen. The goal should be to select “information-rich” cases in relation to the research aim – that is, cases worthy of in-depth study (Patton, 1990; Perry, 1998; Ghauri and Gronhaug, 2005). For this study, seven case studies were developed from the food context of the research – addressing i-branding relating to the marketing of products with experience/credence characteristics. Appendix 4 provides detail on case business background and managers interviewed.

Each case consisted of three data collection approaches, selected to achieve the depth and richness of information required to address the research aim. Importantly the interview themes presented in Appendix 3 also provided the platform for a content analysis approach and for analysing case study interview transcripts. Additionally secondary evidence was collected relating to case food businesses and, importantly, to relevant cases from other industrial sectors that were appropriate to explaining how businesses managed i-branding of search products to create brand equity:

Data collection approach 1. For each of the seven cases in-depth interviews conducted with managers in the initial research – with the 20 food businesses – were supplemented by additional interviews with other relevant managers from selected case businesses to generate additional i-branding managerial insights – in total three in-depth interviews for each case (see Appendix 4). Interviews were conducted utilising the semi-structured in-depth interview themes (Appendix 3) and the approach employed with the initial sample of 20 food businesses.

Data collection approach 2. In-depth interviews were supplemented by content analysis of each case business web site. Content analysis of web sites has been used effectively in previous research to examine branding aspects such as the degree of interactivity within web sites (Ghose and Dou, 1998), web site advertising/promotion (Perry and Bodkin, 2000), and building customer relationships online (Geissler, 2001). Perry and Bodkin (2000) recommend the development of categories and sub-categories to guide the researcher towards specific web site tools/applications for analysis. The categories and sub-categories developed for this research were directly derived from the in-depth interview themes (Appendix 3). Content analysis was employed to examine each case business web site relating to the management of i-branding to create brand equity. By employing web site content analysis that reflected the in-depth interview themes the researchers hoped to address areas that may not have been covered by interviewees – ensuring that each case developed the depth and richness of insight required.

Data collection approach 3. Secondary documentary evidence relating to case businesses was collected in the form of offline company information and marketing literature, in order to supplement the data collected in the first two data collection approaches. Documentary evidence consisted of company background/history recent trading history, and policies/strategies. The documentary evidence allowed the in-depth interviews to concentrate specifically on i-branding issues, while allowing the researchers

to build a rich background of businesses into the case studies. The researchers also collected relevant secondary data, illustrating how businesses marketing search products from other industrial sectors managed i-branding to create brand equity. This data was critical to the analysis where an explanation was provided of how businesses manage i-branding to create brand equity for experience/credence and search products.

Analysis approach: evaluating relationships between pillars

Data collected by the three approaches was triangulated in the analysis of the seven cases. Triangulation refers to the integration of data from collection approaches within cases in order to develop the richness of information required, while ensuring reliability (Ghauri and Gronhaug, 2005). As explained, interview transcript and web site content analysis was guided by the themes presented in Appendix 3 and the four major assest categories relating to brand equity. Subsequent to the development of each case the researchers utilised these themes to identify interactions and relationships between the four pillars in a cross-analysis of cases relating to the creation of brand equity. The food industry context of the cases produced findings relevant to explaining how businesses were managing i-branding to create brand equity, in the context of marketing products classified by experience and credence characteristics. Additionally the researchers introduced relevant case examples from different industrial sectors, which explain how pragmatic businesses marketing products classified by search characteristics manage i-branding to create brand equity.

Research findings

Primary research conducted in this paper – data collection and analysis – was based upon the four pillars of i-branding conceptual framework (Figure 1). Given the focus provided in relation to specific i-branding tools/applications utilised by case businesses to create brand equity, findings are now presented within the four pillars before integration within the analysis section following. The findings presented in this section relate to an explanation of how food businesses manage i-branding to create brand equity – relevant to experience/credence products. The next section presenting an analysis of these findings integrates additional cases from other industrial sectors that explain how businesses manage i-branding in the context of search products.

Understanding customers

Company A stated that there was a need to develop an understanding of customers in order to create trust in buying food from its web site. It had developed a database that was critical within this context. Web analytics and cookie technology were utilised, allowing them it monitor customer activities while on the site. It also hosted an online community forum which was remotely monitored. Information gleaned from the analytics technology, the community forum and web site contact points was entered into the database. Based upon customer information stored, Company A subsequently designed a targeted and personalised promotional/thank-you e-mail campaign. This was aimed at customers identified as regular purchasers from California. These customers had to pay higher shipping charges for their food products – particularly perishable products – and the offer of a coupon waived shipping fees for a certain time period. By rewarding these more committed customers Company A was attempting to make them brand ambassadors and generate higher revenues – directly and indirectly.

Company B was utilising a database to incorporate customer information from their its (integrating with offline) touch points, including web site contact point, web analytics, customer feedback forms, RSS feeds, and opt-in e-mail newsletters. It used the data to target customers through e-mail marketing campaigns – permission-based. Company B had built detailed profiles of its most loyal and profitable customers online. Customers were targeted with special offers and messages that emphasised their importance. Company B also used its database to highlight web site buying frequency. Customers that had bought within a recent time period were viewed as being more liable to purchase again if e-mailed with a special offer.

Marketing communications

Company C had a core product offering that was low cost and not suited for transacting online – mass market chocolate confectionery. However it had carried out market research that showed that is offline target markets were interested in skateboarding. Based on this customer understanding, Company C provided streaming video on its web site of skateboarding events sponsored by the company with the brand logo prominent. Company C believed that its web site was a cost-effective marketing communications tool that could be utilised to associate its brand with lifestyle pursuits that were integral to customers who bought its products.

Company D was a niche speciality mustard company. While it had a distinguished heritage, market research revealed that target customers perceived it as “stuffy” and “staid”. To address these issues, Company D utilised its web site in order to reposition its brand image among target customer groups offline and online – they were viewed as being essentially the same in profile. Company D redesigned its web site to communicate a brand image that was aligned with target customers’ brand associations – online and offline. An e-mail-a-friend recipe card was utilised as a marketing communications tool for spreading this brand image virally to other customers. The Mustard Lover’s Club provided various features to engage customers, communicating the repositioned brand image. The Club provided opportunities for customers to upload photographs of themselves with the company’s mustard products from well-known tourist destinations around the world. Comments were then posted by other visitors with photograph contributors able to respond.

Interactivity

Company A built upon the connotative nature of its Irish food products by hosting an online community forum. Customers interacted with each other, telling culinary stories about trips to Ireland and swapping Irish food recipes. Company A actively contributed to and monitored the forum on an ongoing basis. It also provided a review feature attached to each food product presented on the web site. Customers were encouraged to post reviews of products and award star ratings. Further postings followed, with customers either agreeing or disagreeing and providing related reasons. Company A believed these internet tools created trust, which it viewed as critical to transacting food products online.

Company E utilised online interactivity within its business to business markets. Its demanding food service customers valued suppliers they could trust, in terms of quality and safety of food products manufactured. Trade customers were given secure login codes allowing them to access an intranet facility on the web site. Once logged in they had control of webcams that were positioned around production lines. The webcams allowed customers to view production lines where their orders were being produced, in

real time. It also allowed customers to check the progress of their orders and gain reassurance in relation to cleanliness, food safety and quality issues in the factory.

Content

Company G produced butter products that had low value – a commodity product. Their web site contained streaming video content consisting of chefs preparing dishes based on their butter products. Customers could watch the preparation of sauces, for example, made with butter in an entertaining and engaging manner. Company G supplemented the video content by developing interactive dialogue on a web site forum. Customers posted comments about the dishes they developed from the video and swapped hints and tips with each other about dinner party etiquette and wines to go with dishes, for example.

Company F discussed the importance of consumer concerns and interest in the role of food within health and nutrition. As an offline retailer of fresh fruit and vegetables it received regular enquiries from customers related to product nutritional and health benefits. However, retail staff did not have the time or knowledge of specific product attributes related to health and nutrition. Within this context Company F had provided detailed nutritional and health content accompanying each of its individual products on the web site. Customers were also provided with hyperlinks to other sites where additional health/nutritional content of relevance could be viewed. Web site navigational features allowed customers to access this content quickly and efficiently. To supplement these features Company F also provided an opt-in newsletter that contained healthy lifestyle content with related special offers/competitions and its products' role within healthy lifestyles.

Analysis of findings

This section presents an analysis of the findings, explaining how case food businesses utilised the internet to create brand equity – marketing products classified by experience and credence characteristics. Additionally, relevant cases are also introduced that explain how businesses from various industrial sectors utilise the internet to create brand equity – marketing products classified by search characteristics. Figures are provided which build upon the analysis.

Evidence from the findings reveal interaction between understanding customers and marketing communications pillar. Based on an understanding of customers, food businesses were able to develop a personalised e-mail marketing communications strategy (Figure 2). To achieve this, databases were utilised that facilitated targeted permission-based marketing communications – viewed as critical to creating trust. To market food online trust is viewed as critical to developing brand equity given the experience/credence characteristics of food products (Ramus and Nielsen, 2005;



Figure 2.

Canavan *et al.*, 2007). By creating targeted and personalised e-mail marketing campaigns case food businesses were gaining from more positive responses in terms of transactions. They were also creating the opportunity for more positive brand perceptions among their customers – who stated that they valued the emails among the spam they regularly received – making the brand image/associations stand out more positively. The strategic focus of e-mail marketing was on creating personalised brand encounters and deepening consumer-brand relationships with loyal customers. Food businesses are often perceived to be constrained in their e-commerce activities by the nature of their products (Park, 2002; Canavan *et al.*, 2007). However, case businesses were attempting to overcome the experience characteristics of food products (lack of sensory experience online) by creating personalised communications that were relevant to individual customers – i.e. developing trust.

The findings also reveal an interaction between understanding customers and interactivity that created an opportunity for further interaction with marketing communications – through personal interactivity (Figure 3). By understanding and meeting customer needs online – and offline – case businesses were effectively creating brand ambassadors who were interacting with other potential customers within web communities, virally spreading positive marketing communications in the form of experiences and evaluations. The potential viral spread of marketing communications on the internet is viewed as significantly greater than what can be achieved offline (Datta *et al.*, 2005). The findings revealed that for experience/credence products online, the development of trust and related customer satisfaction was viewed as critical to ensuring it was positive viral brand messages that were being spread. This is particularly important for food products with a strong credence context (e.g. difficult/or impossible to evaluate by an average customer, for example whether an orange was produced organically) where customer evaluations are difficult to make and where third party-assistance can be critical. These pillar interactions were also producing a reverse interaction with the understanding customers i-branding pillar (Figure 4). Contrarily this reverse interaction will be more useful where businesses are

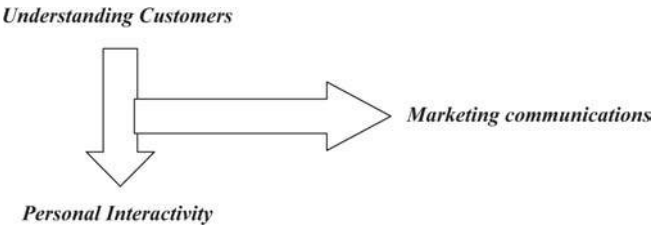


Figure 3.

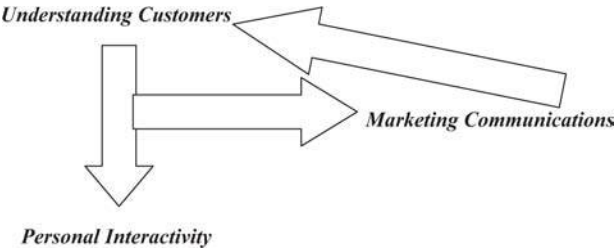


Figure 4.

not always pleasing customers. In this context customers will personally interact, potentially spreading more negative viral communications, which will allow the business to pinpoint where they are failing to create value and potentially damaging their brand. Businesses can generate significant insights into customer views of their products, service and performance image.

This context can be equally as important for businesses marketing search products – both tangible and intangible. For example, hotels need to give critical attention to understanding their customers' needs with the rise of the internet. Hotel.com provides an extensive and global community forum where past customers will rate and comment – positively and negatively – on specific aspects of hotel value propositions. Customers searching for a suitable hotel are now significantly influenced by the marketing communications provided by these brand ambassadors, with brand equity critically linked to their evaluations. And, hotel marketing managers will find value in monitoring how customers perceive their value proposition – negative and positive.

From a different i-branding perspective interaction between understanding customers, content, interactivity and marketing communications was evident. Machine interactivity allows customers to directly control and modify content of a mediated environment in real time (see Coyle and Thorson, 2001; Wu and Chang, 2005; Figure 5). Case food businesses were creating brand equity online not through a singular understanding of overt customer needs relating directly to their product offerings. They had probed beyond these needs to activities that their target customers valued and identified with strongly – particularly relating to lifestyles. Contemporary consumers, while still requiring the right product in the right place and at the right price, are also seeking brand experiences linked to the expression of their identity and self-concept (Salzer-Morling and Strannegard, 2004). The findings revealed examples of case business web sites that reflected the personality or the desired images that target customers had, or wanted, of the business and their products. This was achieved through the development of content exhibiting machine interactivity, which represented a marketing communications tool in the creation of a brand image reflecting these desired images.

With regards to search products, content employing machine interactivity can be usefully employed to create brand equity. Critically, however, the researchers noted that this will be directly related to the level of tangibility attributable to the product and based upon an understanding of customer needs. For example, search products with low tangibility have opportunities to utilise the internet in order to enhance customer search capabilities, over and above the offline context. iTunes provides customers with the facility to sample artists' back catalogues of music before considering a transaction. This facility has enabled Apple to build strong brand identity/associations with target customers. Search products with high tangibility can also usefully utilise content, employing machine interactivity to reduce the sensory gap between customer and product online. Estate agency firms are now effectively

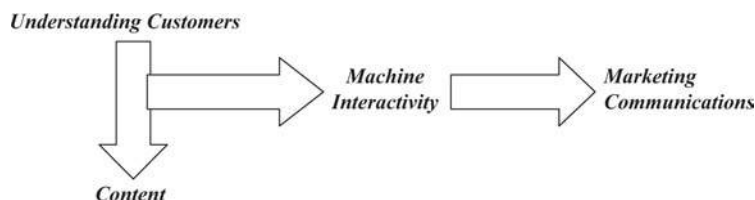


Figure 5.

employing 360-degree virtual tours of properties they are selling. Customers can now take control of “virtual viewings”, at any time and either pre/post physical viewing of a property for sale. Estate agents are utilising content with this form of machine interactivity to support their offline efforts to create brand equity with their target markets – property vendors and buyers.

While complex, interactions between understanding customers, content and machine/personal interactivity revealed significant i-branding innovation in this study (Figure 6). Innovative case businesses utilised their understanding of customers to develop content that employed machine interactivity, which subsequently motivated customers to personally interact around this content (Figure 7). By providing streaming video of chefs making dishes with their core butter product, a case business utilised the engaging nature of this content employing machine interactivity to further encourage customers to personally interact with each other and the business around the content. From a different perspective these interactions were providing a reverse interaction with understanding customers. The personal interactions were providing an online customer focus group facilitating personalised understanding of customers views and opportunities to create additional online value propositions.

For businesses marketing search products, interactions between understanding customers, content and machine/personal interactivity were also evident. Importantly, the researchers found that relevant cases included businesses marketing tangible search products. Tangible search products online face similar challenges to products classified by experience/credence characteristics. These relate to the sensory disconnect between customers and products. However, businesses such as Warehouse – an offline/online retailer of clothing – were innovatively attempting to address this disconnect online, creating positive brand associations in the process. Through its web site Warehouse provided a blog that related to what customers like to do offline – browse and chat with peers for verification and enlightenment. The blog has relevant background to various fashion strands of interest provided by leading fashionistas. It then presents relevant lines offered by Warehouse that customers can click on and browse in detail by rolling their mouse over the product to view from

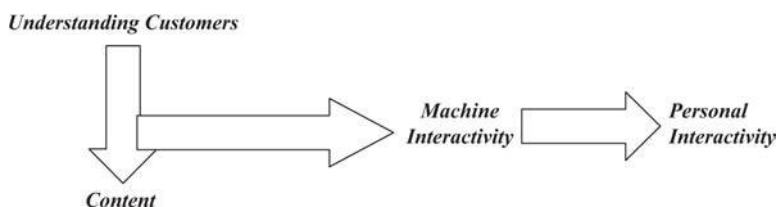


Figure 6.

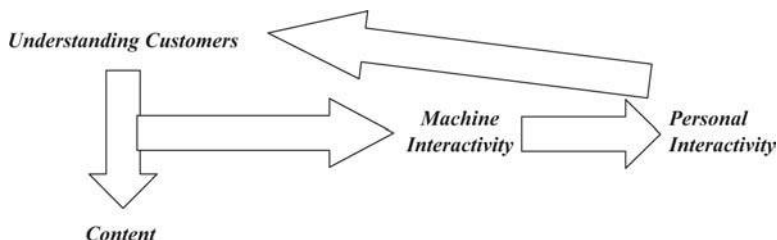


Figure 7.

various angles and with the use of zoom facilities. After browsing the content employing machine interactivity, customers are then invited to interact personally, posting comments to a blog relating to their views of the products and other related topics of interest.

As a final point of interest, relevant content exhibiting machine interactivity (e.g. hyperlinks) was providing opportunities for case businesses to track customers – registered with the web site – who clicked on such content and, for example, on hyperlinks to other content of interest to them – and case businesses – within or without the web site (Figure 8). The utilisation of web analytics and cookie technologies facilitated tracking these customers, allowing probing of what they were interested in remotely. In turn, this understanding was fed into a customer database.

Managerial implications

The analysis presented has implications for practicing marketing managers within the context of congruence or fit between product and channel (De Figueiredo, 2000; Li and Gery, 2000). The research has identified specific internet tools and their application within opportunities to create brand equity for products classified by experience, credence and search characteristics. Importantly, an understanding of target customers will be critical in underpinning the selection and deployment of these tools.

Internet tools that facilitate interactivity are particularly significant in relation to products exhibiting experience, credence and search characteristics. For products classified by experience characteristics, personal online interactions can be utilised effectively to engage customers around experiential aspects of the product. People want to exchange stories and opinions about Irish food or their signature dishes using butter, for example. And if this takes place on a business's web site and around its products, the opportunities for creating brand equity can be significant. From the credence perspective, the utilisation of machine interactivity – for example hyperlinks to relevant content on other web sites – can allow customers to assess product characteristics that will be difficult or impossible for the average customer to evaluate in such depth offline (e.g. health/nutritional claims of food products). For products classified by experience and credence characteristics, personal interactions between customers – for example through web site forums or send-to-a-friend e-mail recipes – can create opportunities for the viral spread of marketing communications that can contribute to the development of brand equity. Third-party verification is an evident i-branding benefit with products classified by experience/credence characteristics where the sensory disconnect is most acute.

With regard to search products the personal context of interactivity is particularly relevant when these are tangible in nature. Similar to i-branding challenges facing experience/credence products, marketing managers need to think innovatively on how

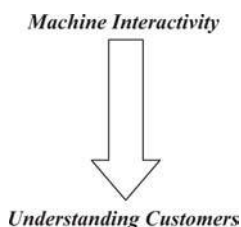


Figure 8.

they can bridge the sensory gap online between the customer and product. Innovative examples have been provided in this study that point to the use of relevant content employing machine interactivity, which subsequently motivates customers to personally interact around this content. Perhaps a critical element within this context is the evolving Web 2.0 platform, with interactive tools increasingly available to decrease the sensory gap between tangible search products and online customers. Employing machine and personal interactivity can provide customers with experiences that compensate for the lack of physical and/or personal contact online. This could be combined with other online value propositions that exceed what is available offline – for example greater product variety and reduced transaction effort for tangible search products (e.g. books and DVDs on Amazon). For search products with low levels of tangibility, marketing managers can allow customers to sample offerings before a transaction, which in many cases will be enacted and delivered instantaneously online.

Additionally marketing managers responsible for experience, credence and search products need to recognise that their products are being evaluated through personal forms of interactivity 24/7 on an ever-growing number of comparison web sites and community forums/blogs. Brand equity is no longer confined to offline marketing strategy. Marketing managers are compelled to ensure that their offline and online branding strategies ensure that third-party verification/viral communications are a positive and not negative force.

Theoretical implications

This paper aimed to explain *how* businesses manage i-branding to create brand equity. Due to the emergent nature of i-branding as an academic area of enquiry, extant research has been focused on specific aspects as researchers have attempted to identify and explore strategic roles. With little integration of thinking the conceptual basis for more applied research – that could also provide a more focused theoretical contribution – has been lacking. Recent conceptual work by Simmons (2007) has built upon branding and the emergent i-branding literature to provide an interpretation of how diverse i-branding tools could combine within four pillars:

- (1) understanding customers;
- (2) marketing communications;
- (3) interactivity; and
- (4) content.

This conceptual framework was utilised by this study to explain *how* diverse i-branding tools combine to create brand equity. The framework also provided a platform for interpreting the emerging i-branding literature underpinning the research in this paper. Given its fragmented nature, the integrated literature review provided in this paper offers researchers in the area a basis for developing more unified thinking relating to the i-branding area of academic enquiry.

Building upon the literature the findings of this study provide evidence of interactions between the four pillars, which represent the combination of specific i-branding tools/applications in attempts by businesses to increase customer brand name awareness, develop brand loyalty, and develop positive perceptions relating to product quality and brand associations. The theoretical implications derived from this

relate to the movement of i-branding understanding from the strategic role of specific tools/applications towards a more holistic explanation of *how* they *combine* to create brand equity. An additional implication is that brand equity represents a valid concept for assessing the management of i-branding. A further implication is that while at a formative stage, the four-pillar framework appears to be a robust conceptual platform from which to develop further studies that can contribute to the development of a theoretical basis for i-branding.

The location of this study within a classification of goods context presents significant theoretical implications. While extant work has yet to position i-branding studies within the classification of goods context, this study reveals that future theoretical developments in i-branding will require contributing studies to consider carefully the impact of such classifications. This study utilised a classification based upon products characterised by experience, credence and search qualities. It was evident that the management of i-branding will have different strategic nuances in relation to each characterisation. For experience products and for search products with tangible characteristics, there are similar i-branding implications relating to the sensory disconnect between products and customers online. This also applies to credence products with the added need for customer reassurance and verification given their difficulty in assessing product claims/benefits. Search products with low tangibility present significant opportunities to create brand equity, given their ability to offer instant gratification to customers.

Conclusions/future research

This paper has attempted to explain *how* businesses manage i-branding to create brand equity. Utilising Simmons (2007) conceptual framework and located within a classification of goods construct, managerial and theoretical contributions are presented. Specific internet tools and their application are discussed within opportunities to create brand equity for products classified by experience, credence and search characteristics. The integrating literature review and research findings presented in this paper provide an important contribution to theoretical development. This paper represents a movement from more narrowly defined studies in this emergent field of enquiry, towards a more holistic understanding of how specific i-branding tools can be combined to create brand equity. The classification of goods construct utilised was an important contributor to this context.

Future research could consider other classification of goods constructs when studying i-branding. For example, Peterson *et al.* (1997) discuss the unique characteristics of the internet as a marketing channel, offering a three-dimensional product classification scheme based on cost, value proposition, and degree of differentiation. De Figueiredo (2000) suggests that products can be classified on a continuum based on customer ability to gauge product quality online; commodity products are at one end of the spectrum while look-and-feel products are at the other end (where quality is more difficult to assess). Comparative studies taking note of these – and other – product classifications could provide further contributions that recognise the potential moderating effect of product/service characteristics on the development of brand equity online.

Further studies could also utilise the framework of Simmons (2007) to build upon this study, utilising qualitative and/or quantitative methods to test its validity and develop it further as a means of explaining how i-branding can be managed to create

brand equity. Given the rise of social networks, blogs and other forms of third-party communications, this will be an increasingly critical strategic issue for marketing managers and researchers in the field.

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Appendix 1. Sampling criteria

Food companies should represent various parts of the food supply chain – primary producers, processors, distributors/wholesalers and retailers.

Rationale: Significant opportunities exist for food companies from various parts of the food supply chain to access end consumers for branding and transactions (Gracia and Albisu, 2001; Sellitto *et al.*, 2003; Ramus and Nielsen, 2005; Simmons, 2007).

Food companies should supply premium niche foods and commodity-based foods.

Rationale: The experience and credence characteristics of food present branding opportunities for both higher and lower value food products (Grunert and Ramus, 2005; Ramus and Nielsen, 2005).

Food companies should adopt web sites which present online value propositions beyond a static online brochure.

Rationale: Creating trust in developing brand equity for food businesses online is critical, with virtual interactivity contended to be a key contributor (Ramus and Nielsen, 2005; Canavan *et al.*, 2007; Simmons, 2007).

Food companies should be online for at least two years.

Rationale: For the smaller businesses researched, lifecycle stage online has been directly associated with the contents/features/sophistication of their Internet adoption and utilisation (Sadowski *et al.*, 2002; Chen *et al.*, 2003; Sultan and Rohm, 2004; Simmons, 2008).

Appendix 2. Food business details – sample of 20

1283

- Company A – Bakery products (Philadelphia, USA, 1,000 employees).
- Company B – Chocolate confectionary (New Jersey, USA, 600 employees).
- Company C – Health food products/dried fruit/seeds (Boston, USA, 400 employees).
- Company D – Butter products (New York, USA, 300 employees).
- Company E – Fresh produce (Boston, USA, 300 employees).
- Company F – Dried fruit and vegetable products (Turkey, 100 employees).
- Company G – Fresh produce (Philadelphia, USA, 80 employees).
- Company H – Meat products (New York, USA, 70 employees).
- Company I – Fresh and frozen pre-prepared convenience foods (Wales, 70 employees).
- Company J – Speciality food products (Philadelphia, USA, 20 employees).
- Company K – Speciality mustard products (Illinois, USA, 20 employees).
- Company L – Tea/coffee products (Northern Ireland, 16 employees).
- Company M – Premium meat and dry-food products (Wales, 14 employees).
- Company N – Online Irish food products (New York, USA, 11 employees).
- Company O – Speciality cheese (Philadelphia, USA, ten employees).
- Company P – Meat products (Philadelphia, USA, nine employees).
- Company Q – Pretzel and marshmallow products (Philadelphia, USA, seven, employees).
- Company R – Bakery/confectionary products (Philadelphia, USA, five employees).
- Company S – Dairy products (Northern Ireland, four employees).
- Company T – Online speciality Irish food products (Northern Ireland, two employees).

Appendix 3. In-depth interview themes/content analysis categories

Understanding customers

- Online surveys/feedback forms.
- Registration facility (outside of transactional process).
- Cookie technology/web analytics employed.
- Community forum.

Marketing communications

- Ambience of web site/information provided.
- Relevance to company brand positioning.
- Viral marketing potential:
 - e-mail a friend;
 - community forum;
 - blog;
 - RSS feeds.

Interactivity

- Machine interactivity:
 - webcams;
 - RSS feeds;
 - streaming video.
- Personal interactivity:
 - e-mail a friend;
 - community forums;
 - blogs;
 - contact points.

Content

- Navigation bars:
 - content grouping/functionality.
- Hyperlinks:
 - linkage efficiency.
- Search options.
- Site maps.
- Download speed.
- Dead link issues.
- Ease of navigation/functionality.

Appendix 4. Case study businesses

Case A: Online retailer/distributor of premium Irish food products to end consumers, NYC, USA (11 employees)

Case A was founded in 2000 as a purely online retailer of Irish food products. These products are imported from Ireland, stored in a warehouse and distributed across the USA following transactions from the company web site. Food products include ambient, speciality and perishable products.

Interviewed managers: Manager 1 – Managing Director; Manager 2 – Marketing Manager; Manager 3 – Operations/IT Manager.

Case B: Manufacturer of bakery products to foodservice and retail sectors, Pennsylvania, USA (1,000 employees)

Case B was founded in 1914. The business goal is to increase shareholder value through leveraging their brand, and increasing sales through core routes, new initiatives and strategic partnerships.

Interviewed managers: Manager 1 – Marketing Manager; Manager 2 – Business Improvement Manager; Manager 3 – IT Manager.

Case C: Chocolate confectionery manufacturer to retail sector, New Jersey, USA (600 employees)
Case C was founded in 1896. The business is currently facing significant challenges in its sector. Creating loyalty with consumers is a key goal for the business. The development of experiential brand associations is being actively pursued through a number of strategies and marketing channels.

Interviewed managers: Manager 1 – Marketing Manager; Manager 2 – Operations Manager; Manager 3: IT Manager.

Case D: Processor of mustard products to foodservice and retail sectors, Illinois, USA (20 employees)

Case D was founded in 1852. The business is widely admired for its innovative approaches to product packaging and unique recipe formulations. Recent years have seen the business attempting to reinvent its brand image to reflect its association with innovation.

Interviewed managers: Manager 1 – Managing Director; Manager 2 – Marketing/Sales Manager; Manager 3 – Operations/IT Manager.

Case E: Processor/distributor of dried and pickled fruit/vegetable products to foodservice sector, Turkey (100 employees)

Case E was founded in 1980. The business has a reputation for innovation. It has an international distribution network, serving multinational food service customers and smaller operations. The business has had to be forward-thinking given the challenge of trading beside, but not within, the European Union.

Interviewed managers: Manager 1 – Managing Director; Manager 2 – Marketing Manager; Manager 3 – Sales Manager.

Case F: Retailer/wholesaler of fresh produce to foodservice sector and end consumers, Pennsylvania, USA, (80 employees)

Case F was founded in 1989. The key business aim is to develop customer loyalty. They model their store and products after suggestions that are provided by customers. They have also moved into the foodservice sector, serving catering companies.

Interviewed managers: Manager 1 – Managing Director; Manager 2 – Marketing Manager; Manager 3 – IT Manager.

Case G: Butter manufacturer to foodservice and retail sectors, New York, USA (300 employees)

Case G was founded in 1923. The business produces what is a low value commodity food product. However, they have been proactive over the years in attempts to continually provide added value. These efforts have focused on their brand as an asset.

Interviewed managers: Manager 1 – Marketing Manager; Manager 2 – Sales Manager; Manager 3 – Logistics/IT Manager.

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