



Developing Insights on Branding in the B2B Context

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Chapter 9

Online Branding and the B2B Context

Robert Bamm, Marc Helbling and Kaisa Joukanen

Abstract

The chapter discusses online branding in the business-to-business domain and the benefits it offers to B2B actors. Online branding is a tool to interact and communicate with existing and potential customers. The authors also present content marketing as a marketing effort available to B2B marketers, as well as the nature of digital relationships in social media. The reader learns the importance of branding the company through digital channels and those benefits that can be reached through such actions. The digital tools presented in the chapter relate to social media, for example, Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube, blogs, search engine optimization, and paid advertising. These tools are discussed in detail, both related to their benefits and pitfalls.

Keywords: Online branding; B2B; social media; B2B marketing

9.1. Introduction

Online branding is becoming increasingly common and important in modern society, as marketing is to a great extent carried out digitally, via various social media platforms, blogs, websites, and other online channels. Even though online communities and the digital context overall are more visible and relevant to consumers in the B2C context, B2B

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companies must also be digitally present and brand themselves for partner companies and stakeholders in the digital context. Brand values in the B2B domain are increasingly communicated using digital tools.

Research related to online B2B branding is, however, scarce (cf. Lipiäinen & Karjaluoto, 2015), as companies are still uncertain of the benefits of online branding in the B2B context. Swani, Milne, Brown, Assaf, and Naveen (2016) argue that one of the main problems concerning digital branding within the B2B sector is that very few companies actually know how they should communicate with their customers and what kind of content they should publish, in order to achieve positive results.

In this chapter, we focus on the importance of online B2B branding and its potential benefits. In addition, the chapter discusses what kind of content B2B companies should strive to publish and suggests how companies can communicate with their business customers. On a side note, this chapter will focus solely on online B2B branding. However, the reader is reminded that digital branding and online branding are not quite the same thing. The difference is simple: online branding requires an Internet connection, whereas digital branding can be done via various other digital platforms. Furthermore, the term social media is often used when discussing online branding. A usual misunderstanding regarding social media is that it only incorporates the most common platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Social media refers to all kinds of online platforms that allow the creation of user-generated content. Thus, blogs and Internet forums are also platforms that fall under the same category (Kohli, Suri, & Kapoor, 2015).

In this chapter, we seek answers to the following questions:

- How important is online branding in a B2B context?
- What benefits can be drawn from online B2B branding, if executed successfully?
- How should B2B companies communicate digitally with their customers? What kind of content should be published?
- Which digital branding platforms should a B2B company consider using?

9.2. The Importance of Online B2B Branding

Traditional branding efforts via, for example, the print media has not disappeared. However, many see traditional brand communication as slowly becoming obsolete, due to digital branding and online branding

(Gustafsson, Rennemark, & Vanseliu, 2016). Many consumers use social media platforms and the Internet on a daily basis. This alone is reason enough for companies to use online tools to their advantage. Online branding efforts are visible for consumers in platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and Snapchat. Therefore, online branding in the B2B context is also becoming more advanced and more important. Business customers are regularly in contact with companies via different digital channels, using, for instance, online communities and web-based video. Such tools become important in building and delivering B2B brand messages. In addition, they also amplify the impact (Freundt, Hillenbrand, & Lehmann, 2013).

Furthermore, online B2B branding offers immense opportunities especially for micro enterprises. Micro enterprises have, in general, limited resources, leading them into difficult positions as regards to competing against larger companies. However, as a consequence of the emergence of social media, small enterprises have better opportunities, when competing in the marketplace (Aruna & Anitha, 2015). This is, in part, due to smaller companies being more flexible and adaptable than larger companies, with regard to new technologies and trends (Braojos-Gomez, Benitez-Amado, & Llorens-Montes, 2015). Yet another reason is the spread of digital content not solely being determined by the firm's budget nor the reputation behind the brand but by the quality of the content itself. This changes the branding landscape and gives smaller companies the much-needed chance to be seen and heard (Kohli et al., 2015).

There are several different goals in the B2B sector that can be achieved in relation to the digital online environment. First of all, the usage of online digital means allows companies to cut costs, as the efficiency of communication and transactions is increased (Sharma, 2002; Walters, 2008). In addition, by using digital marketing tools, B2B companies are able to communicate brand and product-related information. As a result, various digital platforms can be used to increase and improve brand awareness, brand attitude, and the purchase intentions of customers (Drèze & Hussherr, 2003; Manchanda, Dubé, Goh, & Chintagunta, 2006).

In summary, it is essential to build a strong brand in the digital age. Branding has, of course, always been important, but taking the online environment into consideration, and the fact that user behavior is constantly changing, staying up-to-date is crucial for any company (Davies, 2016).

9.3. The Characteristics of Online B2B Branding Strategies

While digital assets for branding purposes have become increasingly important in today's market environment, there is a wide array of options and strategies available to pursue branding in the digital context. While the business model has a significant impact on the digital branding strategy (Riekhof, 2001), the general aim of an online branding strategy should be to increase brand loyalty, brand awareness, and strengthen the brand's reputation. This will potentially result in an increase in buyer engagement and improved customer relationships, which in turn will be more likely to lead to increased profitability and sales (Kumar & Mirchandani, 2012; Michaelidou, Siamagka, & Christodoulides, 2011; Rapp, Beitespacher, Grewal, & Hughes, 2013). Most of the common online branding approaches used within a digital branding strategy focus on the customer experience, customer engagement, content marketing, etc. (Kreutzer & Land, 2017). Online branding in itself requires a significantly different approach compared to more traditional channels, especially in terms of the dynamics and the adjustments needed for the marketplace; both these will ultimately lead to an agile strategy with the parallel goal of retaining a strategic position in the market for the long term. If the focus is put too strongly on short-term results, there is a risk that the reputation and trustworthiness of the brand will be damaged (Kreutzer & Merkle, 2015).

The efficiency of most platforms used in an online branding strategy is heavily dependent on the number of people that share and visit the available content. This requires a firm to be very selective of the content that is distributed and requires an understanding of what will be shared and spread between the target customers (Berger & Milkman, 2012). Ideally the target customers will be made to feel that by sharing and interacting with the company and its brand, they are supporting and confirming their own identity and values (Lovett, Peres, & Shachar, 2013; Rapp et al., 2013). In contrast to B2C, B2B companies concentrate their digital branding more on the brand itself, rather than on individual products (Mudambi, 2002) and tend to appeal to the functional features of their services or products (Brown, Zablah, Bellenger, & Donth, 2012; Lohtia, Donthu, & Hershberger, 2003). In B2B, a mostly umbrella approach can be observed that focuses on the corporate brand (Michell, King, & Reast, 2001). According to Swani, Brown, and Milne (2013), B2B consumers are much more influenced by corporate brands than B2C consumers, which, in turn, shows the importance of emphasizing the corporate brand in online branding strategies.

9.4. The Basis for Digital Relationships in Social Media

The communication between companies and their customers has changed dramatically during the last decades, as more people are now constantly connected to the Internet and may access information at any time and in any location (for instance, using various mobile devices). The birth of social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn, has spurred change and altered the way B2B companies interact and communicate. Online platforms place companies under pressure to be present, active, and thoughtful in their everyday communication with customers and partners (Hamilton, Kaltcheva, & Rohm, 2016). Companies that recognize the relational aspect of social media are able to benefit from it (*ibid.*). One-way communication from a marketer to a customer is no longer a valid model for communication. Rather, today communication is based on interaction between the different actors. With the right kind of communication, companies can benefit from this paradigm shift (Kohli et al., 2015).

Furthermore, when communicating online, companies should avoid coming across as robots, who only present facts or figures. Even though the interaction does not take place face-to-face, companies should strive to present themselves as friendly and attentive human beings (Hamilton et al., 2016). This aspect is natural in the B2C context, where interaction takes place between the company and individual consumers. However, it is important to remember that people working in B2B companies are human beings too (see Chapter 8 on the emotional aspect of B2B branding and its importance). This notion is important as regards relationship building and maintenance in digital and online environments.

In practice, building relationships through online channels can be done by commenting on content generated by people and other companies, engaging in and contributing to discussions, and also by merely being present and available. Using promotional strategies that emphasize the co-creation of content and meaning is something that companies should strive for, when developing digital relationships. This can be helpful if a company wants to create long-term relationships with critical actors (Tiago & Veríssimo, 2014). Moreover, creating valuable content is a key strategy, when building relationships, especially in social media platforms. We will explore this issue further in the next section.

9.5. B2B Branding and Communication through Content Marketing

Digital content marketing has become more important for marketers. For instance, a survey reported that 86% of B2B marketers practice content marketing in their organizations (Pulizzi & Handley, 2014). Similarly, Järvinen and Taiminen (2015) report that nearly 60% of B2B buyers complete their purchasing process online, before or without contacting the seller. The purchase decision is made based on search results and evaluating the subsequent digital content found. Content thus becomes important and critical for B2B interaction. Holliman and Rowley (2014) define B2B digital content as involving the creation, distribution, and sharing of relevant and timely content, which has the purpose of engaging customers. Additionally, time and temporality is of utmost importance, as the engagement must occur at the appropriate point in the buying process. Content marketing differs from traditional marketing, in the sense that it strives to present customers with valuable information that the customers actually wants to consume and interact with, rather than disrupting the customer with sales advertisements.

Valuable digital content usually refers to texts, pictures, and videos, often included in an article on the company's website or a social media post (Holliman & Rowley, 2014). What the content should be about depends on what the company thinks its customers value and are interested in. For example, a clothing manufacturer could make a video explaining how its use of natural materials benefits the environment, or a computer manufacturer could publish an article telling customers how to speed up their computer in three simple steps. Basically, the point is that companies should publish interesting and compelling content, which somehow relates to their business and communicates some of their brand values (Pulizzi, 2013). In addition, the location of the content is a key factor. Companies should strive to publish their content on their website, or, for example, a company blog. This way, people who interact with the content will automatically become acquainted with the rest of the website as well.

Such activities, as mentioned above, aid the company in achieving goals. First, the company succeeds in creating value for their target group, which could potentially improve the customer's relationship with the company brand. Second, the company provides itself with the opportunity to be seen as a topic leader in its industry, which is potentially good for its brand reputation (Holliman & Rowley, 2014). Third, the company may demonstrate its knowledge and skills, which could

lead to higher brand trust (Pulizzi, 2013). Fourth, a content marketing strategy enables the benefits offered by search engine. By publishing content on various topics via/through, for example, a company blog, a company can increase the chance of popping up in people's search results on Google and other search engines. This will result in increased traffic on the company website and potentially an increase in potential customers (Pulizzi, 2013).

Adapting a B2B digital content marketing strategy does require a certain mind-set for marketers. First of all, marketers have to shift their thinking from "selling to customers" to "helping customers." In addition, marketers must also gain insight into how they should go about helping their customers. Furthermore, content marketing is concerned with the long term. Instead of thinking in terms of short-term campaigns, marketers have to understand the long-term effect of consistently delivering valuable content to their customers. Marketers must also know in which form the content should be published and through which platforms (Holliman & Rowley, 2014).

Essentially, content marketing focuses on telling the brand story in such a way that it engages customers and prospects. The story related should mainly be about the company brand not the company itself or its products or services. The story should also strive to aid, not to sell. Non-opportunistic behavior builds trust and calls upon customers to notice and care about the company's story, provided it brings them value (cf. Holliman & Rowley, 2014).

9.6. Online Branding Platforms Are Becoming Relevant for B2B Marketers

The ever-increasing amount of online branding platforms offers a wide selection of different options in which to engage. This ranges from the more traditional digital platforms to the more recently emerging social media channels, which are often underestimated or ignored (Swani, Brown, & Milne, 2014). Research from 2011 and 2012 has shown that only 5% of all marketing professionals, included in a survey, considered social media as a well-optimized element of their marketing strategy (Giamanco & Gregoire, 2012), and a total of 25% of all B2B companies use social media in their branding approach (Michaelidou et al., 2011).

Social branding platforms are a powerful tool that enable a company to communicate with their target audience and create so-called brand communities (Zaglia, 2013) as well as maintain and build brand identity

and new relationships (Keller, 2009). The same elements of communication are embedded in well-known models, such as the model of Hoffman and Novak (1996) concerning the conceptual foundations of marketing in hypermedia computer-mediated environments. Ultimately, B2B customers can be approached through digital platforms and social media in the same way as B2C customers in order to create an increased engagement with the brand (Keller, 2009; Lovett et al., 2013). Online branding platforms can also be used as industry-related information sources for branding purposes (Theobald, 2017), as is often the case with blogs and social media content.

In the following section, we present some of the most common platforms and tools that can be utilized for online B2B branding.

9.6.1. Twitter

There has been extensive research conducted on the topic of B2B branding using Twitter. Twitter is often not the first platform that comes to mind when thinking about digital branding targeted at business customers. Because of this, many companies ignore the platform or are simply unaware of its importance, as research from Michaelidou et al. (2011) shows. As with other platforms, social media has the potential to enhance brand equity (Swani et al. 2014). When using Twitter in a B2B context, most companies utilize a high number of hyperlinks and hashtags in their tweets. Observations by Swani et al. (2014) showed a 5% higher quantity of hyperlinks and a 12% higher quantity of hashtags in tweets from *Fortune* 500 B2B companies, compared to B2C companies. The common characteristics of online B2B branding strategies are also visible on Twitter. On Twitter, a lower number of emotional appeals occur and are replaced by a higher focus on functional appeals and informational facts. With the increasing importance of brand relationships in B2B markets and social media in general, Twitter can be expected to become, and remain, an essential platform for B2B marketers (Rapp et al., 2013).

9.6.2. Facebook

Due to its massive popularity throughout the population, Facebook has in recent years increasingly become a target of interest for B2B companies (Swani et al., 2013). An important factor is also the Facebook Like button. While it is a simple feature, it has brought a traffic increase of

40% for companies (e.g., Levi Strauss). This is due to the fact that actions, such as pressing a Like button, will have an impact on the information and suggestions that an individual's social network will receive ([Adobe Online Marketing Suite Best Practice Guide, 2011](#)). This can be especially advantageous if people have contacts from work in their social network. Based on experiences from B2C, research has shown that most people would prefer a brand that their Facebook friends like, and similar effects can be observed when sharing posts within a network ([Swani et al., 2013](#)). This automated word-of-mouth concept makes Facebook a valuable tool in online branding. [Swani et al. \(2013\)](#) show that the most effective B2B posts contain brand names and commercially related information, rather than hard selling, emotional content, and specific products, which is the practice of B2C companies ([Minett, 2002](#)).

9.6.3. LinkedIn

Very much like Facebook or Twitter, LinkedIn can be used in a similar way to engage in B2B branding practices. Overall, the concept is almost identical to that of Facebook, however, with the difference that this social network is mostly populated by industry professionals. This can be an advantage when engaging certain B2B targets, especially those that are less commonly found in other social platforms ([Burger, 2014](#)).

9.6.4. YouTube

YouTube has in recent years become increasingly important as a branding platform for B2B companies. Some examples are Volvo Trucks (e.g., videos with the actor Jean-Claude Van Damme) and Cisco, who produce hundreds of videos to engage their customer base. In addition to distributing videos through a channel of its own, YouTube also offers the possibility of video advertisements, embedded in other videos, for viewers that match the company's target audience ([AdWords Help, 2017](#)).

9.6.5. Blogs

Blogs have been in use for a considerable amount of time. With the help of great storytelling and writing, it is possible to utilize this form of communication to either directly or indirectly (sponsorship) engage

with the target audience. A practical example of this is Adobe, which has several blogs dedicated to different product categories ([Adobe Blogs, 2017](#)), as well as Salesforce ([Salesforce Blog, 2017](#)). The focus of blogs is the improvement of consumer engagement and brand awareness. Depending on the style of the blog, and its concept and function, it can range from market communications to public relations ([Theobald, 2017](#)). Blogs can also be used to boost the efficiency and visibility of other digital media channels, and vice versa, in addition to being a tool for increasing search engine visibility ([Miller, 2012](#)).

9.6.6. *Search Engine Optimization*

Search engine optimization (SEO) is one of the most powerful tools for increasing a company's brand awareness among its customers. There are several different search engines to which the SEO can be tailored. Google is one of the most used search engines worldwide ([Search engine market share, 2017](#)). With an optimal SEO strategy, it is possible to boost the company's web presence to the top search results of specific keywords. Such a strategy is essential for a company aiming at capturing the interest of new customers.

9.6.7. *Paid Advertising (AdWords)*

Often used as an extension to SEO, tools like Google AdWords offer an enormous opportunity to increase brand awareness at a relatively low cost, depending on the keywords and geographic region in which it is used. There are several different ways that AdWords can be utilized: the Google Display Network, the Google Search Network, and Mobile Ads. By paying for ad space in the Google Search Network, a company is able to compensate for insufficient SEO or bridge the categorization update from the search algorithm, by placing content on several different locations in the search engine. The Google Display Network aims at ad space on third-party websites, and mobile ads are specifically targeted to mobile devices. AdWords allows control over the purchased ads, target groups, and cost control, and can be useful if used correctly ([AdWords Help, 2017](#)).

According to Beck (2009), a tool such as the AdWords Search Network can increase brand awareness by 21%. Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that the effect of brand awareness will only be triggered if a person searches using the same registered keywords.

This means that if the keyword is something that does not naturally come to mind, the reach will automatically be limited.

9.7. Summarizing Thoughts on Online B2B Branding

Recognizing the importance of an online B2B branding strategy is vital to companies. With people spending progressively more time online, B2B companies simply cannot afford not to brand themselves online. Apart from increased brand awareness, loyalty, and reputation, companies can also build and maintain good relationships with customers and partners by branding themselves online. All these factors, when combined, can without question increase profitability and sales. Although the various digital platforms are important branding tools for companies of all sizes, it is potentially even more important for smaller companies with fewer resources at their disposal. There are two main reasons for this. First, online branding is cost-efficient in comparison to traditional, offline branding. Second, the spread of the published content is not exclusively determined by the budget behind the content but rather by its quality. This fact makes it possible for small companies to enter the competition for people's attention.

Companies should strive at designing their marketing communication in such a way that it communicates their brand values. Brand values are typically those attributes that companies want their customers to associate with the brand. By creating content that enhances and nurtures these values, a company can potentially achieve its goal of conveying the desired image of the brand into people's minds. Furthermore, as regards the content published online, it should bring value to the customers and thus engage them in voluntary consumption of the content. What can be considered valuable content depends on the industry and the customers, but the aim should be to (1) inform, (2) entertain, (3) inspire, and/or (4) emotionally touch the customer. The potential result of using content marketing on a regular basis is increased customer loyalty, brand reputation, and profitability.

In many cases, the content can be linked and duplicated over several online platforms concurrently, which allows for a wide coverage with minimal effort. For most companies, social media platforms such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, and blogs are of the highest importance, followed by YouTube, online forums, etc. The recommendation is to engage in multiple platforms but to concentrate on special effort on those in which the customer base is either engaged or expresses interest

toward. When commencing online branding and social media strategies, it can be particularly useful to engage in a multitude of online channels, and then latter reinforces the company's presence and content frequency only on those with the most significance. Platforms as well as results can vary heavily depending on the industry.

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