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Developing Insights on Branding in the B2B Context

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Chapter 1

Value of B2B Branding

Wilhelmina Sirén, Michela Airava and Fuad Hasan Khan

Abstract

This chapter presents a short overview of core branding values and provides a description of how to capture them in a business-to-business (B2B) context. However, the reader should keep in mind that the value of branding is a broad term consisting of different aspects, which makes it challenging to capture and present them all in one chapter. For this reason, the authors have chosen to introduce diverse facets of brand identity and image, customer values, and sustainability issues, which are part of the core values of branding in a B2B context. These issues are also elaborated in more detail in Chapters 2, 5, and 10. In addition, the authors present brand-building tools for managers, such as personal selling, direct marketing, public relations, trade shows and exhibitions, as well as advertising and sales promotion. Finally, the applicability of these tools is demonstrated through the practical example of Axel Technologies and their Fuugo service.

Keywords: Brand value; corporate identity; corporate reputation; sustainability; B2B; employer branding

1.1. Introduction

A brand can be described as the distinguishing feature of the company, and the reflection of its qualities is intended to attract the customer

(Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006). A strong brand is perceived to be focused on building and maintaining strong and positive perceptions in people's minds about the company in focus. However, the phenomenon is, according to Cretu and Brodie (2007), largely exploratory and they state that there has been little systematic testing of the topic. Until recently, the main concepts, theoretical models, and empirical research on branding were unclear, vague, and blurry as regards industrial brands. Due to the lack of sufficient research, especially in terms of corporate branding, we agree with the argument of Ind (1997, p. 2) that: "Corporate branding is one of those things that everyone believes is important, yet there is very little consensus as to what it means."

The corporate brand is in reality the story we are told about the company, that is, the story that makes the customer prefer one company over another (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006). On top of obvious aspects such as the company's history, products, and so forth, the brand includes expectations, promises, emotions, and social cues. In order to attach certain value to the brand, according to Kotler and Pfoertsch (2006), the company needs to discover what values can be demonstrated in the brand itself. A strong brand needs to intertwine the product with its identity and value and successfully convey them to the customer. The total brand equity is, in its essence, the value that the brand provides for the product or a company (Mudambi, Doyle, & Wong, 1997).

Furthermore, it is commonly argued that branding is only relevant in a business-to-consumer (B2C) context, as it based on "non-rational" behavior, whereas the B2B context is traditionally viewed as based on very rational behavior (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006). Products and services associated with B2B business are traditionally chosen after taking into account the "hard facts" which would be the features or functionality, the price, service, quality, and so forth. The prerequisites for this idea is that people in the process of doing business are able to form entirely objective and rational decisions, a statement that has become increasingly questionable (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006). This could explain why there are so many distinctive differences between rivals in a specific market who produce nearly identical services or products but yet do not even come close to each other in terms of market shares. This is true for many globally established companies, for instance, the power balance between The Coca-Cola Company and Pepsi. Many would argue that The Coca-Cola Company has a stronger and more distinguished brand which is why they are somewhat superior when it comes to market shares (Yoffie & Kim, 2011).

In addition, several of the most significant brands globally are B2B brands. Some of them are of course operating in a B2C context as well, but the main business is still B2B (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006). A strong brand will in many ways give value to a B2B company, as it gives to a B2C company, since the branding in itself gives the company a sense of purpose. In simple terms, the brand helps companies differentiate in the industry by sharing a story, as well as providing an identification tool for products and services (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006). Therefore, we can conclude that the modern view on brands and branding has overcome the skepticism and the notion of strict difference between B2B and B2C contexts. The reasons for this are the ever-expanding array of choices and the need to be different in a world where everything seems to be the same. With a valuable brand, companies can distinguish themselves from the rest of the market.

Therefore, the brand value is essentially what all companies strive for (Mudambi, 2002). In other words, companies want to be seen as valuable and also be valuable for that matter. What then does the brand mean for customers? What do potential customers value and how can the company respond and create a substantial and valuable brand offering? The aim of branding for companies in B2B contexts is therefore to optimize branding strategies in order to increase the overall value of their company, products, and services, in comparison to their competitors on the market (Mudambi, 2002). This in turn has an impact on issues such as the firm's sustainability, brand image, reputation, and identity. These issues are further explored in Chapters 2, 5, and 10.

Increased brand value has a positive influence on B2B customer relationships. However, we need to keep in mind that some customers are far more receptive to a corporate brand, while branding is less important to others (Mudambi, 2002). In order to identify how brand value is achieved and why brand value is important for some but not all customers, it needs to be observed from different contextual standpoints, with a focus on the audience and the specific situation (ibid.). Companies need to understand their brand and what it provides for a specific context, that is how the branding affects the potential customer and customer relationship (Malaval, 2001). However, there is still a considerable amount to learn about B2B branding and how business actors can benefit from a strong corporate brand.

Furthermore, it is important to notice that there are many corporate brands that have been around for decades and also a considerable number that are new to the markets. An example of a strong corporate brand that has been around for a long time is IBM which was founded

in 1924 (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006). However, time is not always a necessity for building a brand. According to Kotler and Pfoertsch (2006), there are also some brands that have succeeded in building a strong brand under a short period of time, such as Intel, Pentium, and grainger.com. These corporate brands can be timeless and unique, as long as they provide long-term value for the customers.

Hague (2006) suggests that branding can offer the company a different and more profitable marketing approach. In other words, branding makes a company more accessible for the customers and a strong brand can act as a differentiating resource for the company. According to Hague (2006), branding offers the company a favorable profitable stance in the market. This refers to the fact that even though companies may depend on identical raw materials, due to the branding effect, the end product may differ significantly in customers' minds (Hague, 2006).

According to Kotler and Pfoertsch (2006), a strong brand also simplifies the decision-making process and gives the company the opportunity to have premium prices. Hague (2006) suggests that brands are important, no matter in which industry they operate. The brand is not only what a company sells, it also represents what the company actually does, and even more importantly, what the company is at its core (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006). In the literature of Kotler and Pfoertsch (2006), they highlight the benefits of creating brand value and loyalty. According to them, brands support a transition from a transaction-based selling, which is short term, into one that is relationship-based and long term. These statements are supported by Konečný and Kolouchová (2013). The authors argue that companies with strong brands can implement and take advantage of premium pricing of their product or service. This can, furthermore, lead to emotional connections with the customers, which then lead to the creation of loyal customers for the company. Malaval (2001) also suggests that the brand provides opportunities for the company to position itself on the market.

1.2.   General Aspects on How to Build a Brand

A strong corporate brand consists of a corporate identity and a reputation. The *corporate identity* presents the internal aspect or a dimension of a brand (Koporcic, 2017). It is what the company represents to its partners or what the company sets out to be (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006). Brand identity is something that is actively constructed by strategists (Aaker, 2002). The identity itself can also be divided into more specific

aspects, such as the actual identity and the desired brand identity, since what the company tries to communicate can be very different from the way people perceive the brand to be. Consequently, there is a great difference between the two. The brand identity can be understood as a long-lasting strategic asset that represents the timeless value of a brand. More information about brand identity can be found in Chapter 2.

At the same time, there is an external aspect or a dimension to a brand, presented by the corporate reputation (Koporcic, 2017). The *corporate reputation* is the reputation of the company (no matter its size) formed and perceived by external companies. According to Cretu and Brodie (2007), company reputation has been described as the combination of how a firm is perceived by other firms, how well the firm meets its commitments and conforms to stakeholders' expectations, and lastly how well the firm's overall performance fits with the company's sociopolitical environment. They also mention that the company's reputation is formed by the perceptions of all the stakeholders in the company (Cretu & Brodie, 2007). However, we would argue that the reputation is formed not only by the perceptions of current but also potential business partners, that is, stakeholders (Koporcic, 2017). Brand reputation can therefore play an important role in B2B markets, especially when it is difficult to differentiate companies from each other (Cretu & Brodie, 2007). More information about the brand reputation can be found in Chapter 5.

In addition to a corporate identity and reputation, there are some other aspects of a corporate brand that are worth examining. For instance, the way a company, through its representatives, "speaks" and "behaves" creates the brand personality. The personality can be shown to the customer by a specific writing style, specifically used colors, any specific designs or design features, and also through a person representing the brand. One example of a person who personalized a brand is George Clooney for Nespresso. A brand thus provides a value for the company through its personality, which goes even beyond the company's products (Hague, 2006).

To understand the deeper meaning of a brand, to communicate its value proposition, and to clarify its stance, de Chernatony (2009) used the concept of "brand promise." Whether it is a product or a corporate brand, the goal of a brand promise is to create and share a long-term value proposition that corresponds with the customers' needs (Knapp, 2008). In other words, the brand promise consists of functional and emotional benefits that come with a brand's product or service experience (Knapp, 2008). However, when building a brand promise,

industrial companies need to be careful in order to avoid mistakes and pitfalls. For more information regarding delivering promises correctly, see Chapter 11.

According to Kotler and Pfoertsch (2006), brands are visual and sometimes even physical devices that serve the purpose of identifying and differentiating the company, service, or product from other similar offerings on the market. Therefore, when building a brand, there are aspects to consider and work through in order to achieve a functional brand approach. According to Kotler and Pfoertsch (2006), when building a strong brand, a company needs to consider the following brand elements: name, logo, tagline (or slogan), and finally the brand story. These elements, together with the brand image and reputation form the visual identity of a brand. According to Kotler and Pfoertsch (2006), the brand elements should always somehow reflect the company essence, brand personality, and corporate culture of the business in order to create integrity. They also suggest that the visual identity has to be designed with a long-term perspective, and that in order to assure the consistency of the visual identity, it is helpful for the company to define branding guidelines for the use of each brand element (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006). Hence, there are a few "tools" that should be considered when branding a company. It could even be said that the brand-building tools function as the "voices" of the brand. They are the means of marketing communication by which companies aim to inform, remind, or persuade customers about their products or services, either directly or indirectly. Brand-building tools, according to Kotler and Pfoertsch (2006) are personal selling, direct marketing, public relations, trade show and exhibitions, advertising, and sales promotion.

The aspect of the *personal selling* aligns with what the company is mostly using in its branding strategy. Personal selling is a face-to-face interaction with one or more current or potential customers with the goal to obtain buying orders. In business markets, especially with a restricted number of customers, it is far more common to sell products and services personally, that is, through direct interactions (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006). However, it is important to keep in mind this assertion by Hague (2006): "sell yourself first, then your company, then your product." He also states that there is nothing like personal relationships when creating a business relationship. However, he also alerts us to potential problems, especially where personal relationships are the basis of the business (Hague, 2006). Read more about the role of branding in B2B relationships in Chapters 5 and 6.

Furthermore, branding that targets an organization's employees, otherwise known as "employer branding" should also be considered as a strong tool for the development of a strong corporate brand. Employer branding is a commonly used term which refers to employer's reputation and its value proposition to its employees (Barrow & Mosley, 2005). At the beginning of development of this term, there was a concept called "employer of choice." Employer of choice was used in order to put firms in a favorable position in many ways, such as retaining a positive customer image, increasing workforce retention rates (Lenaghan & Eisner, 2005), increasing financial performance (Becker & Huselid, 1999), and higher returns for the shareholders (Shellenbarger, 1998). All these findings led to the idea of employer branding. According to Ambler and Barrow (1996), employer branding is the package of functional, economic, and psychological benefits provided by employment and identified with the employing company. A more thorough review on the perspective of employer branding can be found in Chapter 4.

Effective communication of brand values is essential in order to become fully aware of the potential of a B2B brand (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006). In business markets especially, the main form of brand communication is through the company's own sales force. *Personal selling* is an important brand-building tool since it affects the brand reputation of the company. Hence, according to Kotler and Pfoertsch (2006), the salespersons appearance and manners are just as important as the customer's factual knowledge of the company. Furthermore, Hague (2006) suggests that strong brands create trust and confidence in industrial markets and are a prerequisite of a strong relationship between a customer and supplier. More about sales within the B2B context can be found in Chapter 7.

Furthermore, Kotler and Pfoertsch (2006) argue that branding, if conducted correctly, secures the future of companies. It often transpires that a well-established brand can lead to a company's survival on the market in the long run. Malaval (2001) suggests that a brand makes the product or service that the company provides more visible to potential customers, which relates to the statement by Kotler and Pfoertsch (2006) concerning the opportunity for differentiation with a branded name. As mentioned earlier, Hague (2006) also highlights that branding can serve as an effective competitive strategy in the industrial market. In other words, a strong brand can lead toward a strong positioning in the market that will exclude the competitors. Usually, in B2B contexts,

the products and services are not very different one from another, so the brand helps the company to stand out and be distinctive.

However, it is important to remember that establishing a brand in a B2B environment is different from the general way of branding for the consumer market. The whole concept of a corporate brand is more complex and needs to be carefully considered when operating in business markets. The main difference between a B2B context and a B2C is the actual nature of the industrial products or services, which are often complex. Other factors to consider, in terms of B2B branding, are the longer lasting relationships, the smaller number of customers, and the larger sales volumes. It is, however, important to have a holistic approach on branding and brand elements regardless of the context. In order to create a holistic brand strategy, a company must consider a complete alignment with the brand promises and values (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006). To be able to do so, a company needs to be focused on its two main elements of corporate branding, as already mentioned: corporate identity and reputation. As noted previously, according to Cretu and Brodie (2007), company reputation has been described as the combination of what the firm is, in the eyes of others; how well the firm meets its commitments and conforms to stakeholders' expectations; and how well the firm's overall performance corresponds with the company's socio-political environment and the reputation. The corporate identity is what the company sets out to be internally and how they want to be perceived externally. Thus, identity goes hand-in-hand with reputation, as the communicated message toward the firm's environment.

1.3.   The Empirical Example of Branding Value

For the purpose of constructing an educational case study, we conducted an interview with a small company called "Axel Technologies Ltd.," located in Turku, Finland. Axel Technologies, often known as "Fuugo" by their clients, operates as an OTT (over the top) solution service provider for video content owners and is therefore establishing itself in the B2B market segment as a service supplier. The interviewee was the Chief Executive Officer of Axel Technologies, Petri Kalske, who founded the company with the help of venture capital. The target of the interview was to discover the actual managerial practice of the company as regard branding and brand value in the industrial market. To obtain accurate information, we ensured that the questions asked corresponded with the topic of the chapter. The interview was

conducted on April 6, 2017 at 11 a.m. in the office of Axel Technologies. The full list of questions can be found in Appendix.

1.3.1. Axel Technologies on the Value of B2B Branding

Axel Technologies is a Turku-based start-up company that is active in the television and streaming software industry. The company provides back-end OTT service platforms mainly for industrial customers of companies in general broadcasting or providers of online streaming services. The OTT service provided by this company is called Fuugo. The end user of the services the company provides are individual consumers who watch television or stream shows online. Axel Technologies has been operating in the broadcasting network industry for more than 10 years.

Initially, when asked about brand and branding strategy, the CEO of the company, Petri Kalske stated that the company does not actively focus on its corporate brand or a product/service brand per se. However, the company strives to create value by offering continuous service support. Throughout the interview, it was clear that the company focuses on functional brand aspects, which also demonstrates the way that the company's brand is delivered and perceived by its customers. We also asked if the company actively uses the aspect of emotional branding in its strategies. However, at his point it became clear to us that the company does not in fact actively think about branding and what its brand is — other than focusing on providing a stable and reliable service to its customers. Similar to many small companies, our case company did not have a branding department nor employees specialized in branding. As an outcome, they did not consider themselves to be a company with a branding strategy.

However, the company has a well-developed web page which showcases their brand elements clearly. This was a very important observation, since the web page is their main form of advertising. We also noticed that the company brands itself through the name and logo of the service, that is Fuugo, not Axel Technologies, which is consistent throughout the entire communication of the company and its service brand. In addition to the name and logo, the tagline regarding flexibility and speed, which is implemented throughout the web page, corresponds with the brand story that is focused on functionality above everything else. In a way, all these aspects together form the "visual code" of the company, which is their guideline on how they communicate their company to partners and potential business customers. This is quite

purposive from the company's standpoint since it delivers a meaningful view and explanation of the service brand that is at the same time functional; nonetheless, it also describes the essence of the company, its brand personality, and in a way also reflects the corporate culture (FuugoTech, 2017).

Thus, through this secondary data, our findings support the fact that company indeed uses several brand-building tools, at least to promote their service brand. As already mentioned in the theoretical part of this chapter, personal selling as a tool is used deliberately by the company to generate exposure of the brand and service. However, we have also derived information from the company web page that indicates the use of brand-building tools as a means of public relations, exhibitions/trade shows, advertising, and sales promotion. Public relations are supported by constant updates through the web page and throughout the company's Twitter account. It is apparent through this channel that the company also participates and partners with other companies in order to create exhibitions and trade shows. This furthermore supports the fact that they want the corporate brand to be associated with other companies in the tech industry, and that they use these channels to gain visibility and context. Through the website and Twitter account, Axel Technologies also generates advertising for the company (FuugoTech, 2017).

Due to the company's small size and restricted financial resources, they are aware of their limitations when competing with industry leaders. Therefore, they promote themselves by highlighting that they have all the features a client demands in an OTT service and that clients can rely on them to provide the fastest service, low budget costs, and flexibility. According to Kalske, Axel Technologies is aware of the continuous change that is occurring in the technology and broadcasting industry, and they are of the opinion that adopting too many features may backfire through the obsolescence of newly incorporated features. For this reason, their business model entirely focuses on service functionalities over feature functionalities. In this way, the company always provides a standardized product that leaves the modification and application of features and add-ons to the customer. This makes the production line for Axel Technologies more straightforward. The unique value proposition of Axel Technologies is *fastest service with low costs*, which emphasizes the service attributes of the technology, as mentioned above. At the same time, they are positioning themselves in the market and throughout their networks by providing a tailor-made service to each client according to their needs. This is the way in which the company

has differentiated itself on the market and created interest among customers.

As a result of the interview and after considering the company's website, we came to the conclusion that the company is currently fully focused on branding their service Fuugo as an OTT platform. For those who are not familiar with the company, it might therefore seem as if Fuugo is the company itself, which is not the case. However, the service brand is being promoted as equal to the corporate brand. Moreover, when pitching Fuugo to industrial customers, the company simultaneously promotes the values of Axel Technologies, such as its fast and reliable service delivery and flexible platform. In other words, the company is displaying its corporate brand through its service to its industrial customers, instead of focusing on Axel Technologies as a corporate name and brand. Consequently, the industrial market actors are currently only aware of Fuugo — the service. The company often presents itself to external influencers such as public parties, governments, and others, on the basis of their service, which in some way influences their corporate identity and reputation as well.

When asked about creating value by keeping the brand promise, Kalske mentioned that most of their large clients always look for a flexible service and the possibility to add feature additions to the pre-existing platform. According to Axel Technologies, their top revenue generating customers are German companies like Prosiben and RTL International Ltd, and the reason these companies are loyal to Axel Technologies and their services is that it keeps its brand promise to provide fast services in a flexible manner. Axel Technologies always meets the challenges of customer requirements and need for customization, for example, in terms of adding new options to their payment systems or adding a new bank payment options for specific countries, and so forth. These aspects of innovation and the constantly evolving climate of the industry demands that the company maintains their brand promise of flexibility and speed.

Regarding branding tactics and activities, we asked the CEO of Axel Technologies if the company practices these, in order to clarify the importance of the corporate brand identity among their employees. According to Kalske, most of the company's employees are technical personnel, except for the CEO himself and several other mid-level employees. These technical employees are often restricted to and busy with maintaining the platform and the service itself, while the top-level actors are responsible for communication and activities with business partners. Most of the meetings are conducted by the CEO and project managers unless the meeting in question requires technical personnel

and their expertise. Therefore, at Axel Technologies, brand identity is communicated through one or a few individuals, which means that the communication is uniform and clear. There is therefore very little chance of providing mixed messages to the customers.

Regarding the development of branding strategies outside the company, according to the CEO of Axel Technologies, the company needs to have a good selling point, which in this case is its flexible service and ability to deliver rapidly. In addition to this selling point, a prerequisite for success is a solid marketing strategy that will present and brand the company itself on the market. This is something that Kalske thinks they should presently be developing and evolving further. He also mentioned, at the end of the day, that often many of the previous clients of Axel Technologies were accessed and acquired through word of mouth and their networking capabilities; both of these served as a reputation-building activity. In other words, when a certain project is performed well, the news spreads swiftly on the market and thus initiates a brand reputation for a company.

1.4.   Discussion of the Findings and Conclusions

As already discussed, B2B branding is still an under-researched phenomenon of industrial marketing. For a long time now, business marketers have been heavily influenced by the belief that there is no place for branding in the B2B context (Leek & Christodoulides, 2011). Due to this, the actors in the industry seldom advertise themselves to their buyers and only focus on improving or maintaining the functional benefits of a product or service (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006). Because of this, the branding perspective has for some time and to a certain extent been forgotten or thought to be unimportant in the B2B market. Regardless of this attitude, time and industry conditions have changed, and businesses today consider branding to be more important.

In today's fast-changing environment, companies need to differentiate from their competitors in some way. However, due to market competitiveness this is harder to do and more complex in a B2B context, where there is often none or little room for differentiation of the actual products or services companies offer. This is why branding in the B2B context, both on an organizational and on product level is important. Traditionally in a B2B context, the most important aspect of branding are tangible issues such as the price or quality of the product. This means that companies can use their brand as a way to create meaning

in the customer relationship and add value to the business (Mudambi, 2002). Axel Technologies does not purposefully practice branding in the sense that they follow a deliberate structured brand strategy. However, through our research, we found that the company is indeed practicing branding, although not purposefully. The company practices branding through, for example, personal selling, which is defined as one of the basic brand-building tools (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006).

Nevertheless, the ultimate goal of branding is to generate positive associations and emotions between customers and a product/service or a corporate brand. Thus, the best result of branding comes when marketers concentrate on the end result rather than generating thousands of features to attract potential buyers. This aspect is also covered in a literature review by Kotler and Pfoertsch (2006), where they mentioned that it is always better to offer features demanded by target customers rather than creating features for a mass market. We concluded that Axel Technologies uses this notion. They benefit from having a strong functional purpose that accordingly generates the same kind of value as described above. Moreover, as we learned, Axel Technologies offers flexible services instead of standardized features to their industrial buyers, which furthermore supports Kotler and Pfoertsch (2006) theory of targeting customers demand.

In the theory section, we discussed brand-building elements, that is the elements that in collaboration with the brand image create the visual identity of a brand (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006). We discovered by reviewing the web page of Axel Technologies that they do possess the brand elements that creates a visual identity, but we did not get an instant impression that they are deliberately managed and sustained as a branding aspect. They do use a distinctive name for their service: Fuugo. However, when talking about "themselves," in a corporate sense, they refer to the name Axel Technologies. Furthermore, they display the logo of the service Fuugo and not as a separate corporate brand logo. A distinct slogan was hard to find with all the statements made on their web pages, but of all the statements, there is a sense of highlighting their functionality and focus on providing a "service at a fast rate."

Additionally, it was quite clear from the discussion with the CEO that although there is no specific framework that Axel Technologies follows, they do use personal selling on a daily basis in order to communicate its brand on the market. According to the CEO, personal selling is the stage at which they initiate their branding. However, the question we needed to ask was how the company intended to build long-lasting

buyer−supplier relationships through industrial branding along with a positive flow of a return on investment. When we asked Kalske how a small company such as Axel Technologies can shape industrial branding in order to position itself favorably among buyers, he answered: "often buyers trust people, not the brand, and that is how we started. And then the word of mouth happened." Therefore, personal selling is indeed important and may help as a tool when branding the company. However, we also discovered that due to such practices, they have built good relationships with many buyers. Building relationships through personal selling was therefore a crucial aspect for the creation of a brand value.

In regard to keeping their brand promise and a positive brand perception among the buyers, one of the most effective ways is to adapt their services and products to each business customer. According to the literature on brand promises, it is something that needs to be consistent with the long-term commitment of a company to its buyers (Knapp, 2008). Moreover, it can be something that helps a company to position itself on a market. Axel Technologies is therefore maintaining its promise to customers on a daily basis.

However, companies do not only conduct their branding activities in order to keep their business partners, as they are also aware that good branding requires a focus on their employees as well. From the literature review, we learnt that employer branding is closely connected with a firm's reputation and value proposition (Barrow & Mosley, 2005). With positive employer-branding activities, companies can increase their financial returns which are crucial for companies like Axel Technologies (O'Sullivan & Murphy, 1998). We also learned through the case company that although they have been doing business for more than 10 years, they had still not achieved the planned return on investment. A reason for this might be that all communication is conducted through a single person, which limits the distribution of brand knowledge among employees. According to an empirical research of 632 customers by one of the big four auditing companies in Sweden, customer and employee relationships can significantly affect the brand equity of a company (Bengtsson & Servais, 2005). Therefore, companies need to initiate training and lecture sessions, which elaborate on the company's mission, vision, strategy, and value-orientation, among other things. Through proper knowledge sharing and distribution of obligations, industrial companies can retain their brand promise to employees, who, in return, will communicate the brand message to customers.

While large companies face intricate barriers in this area, small companies can maintain smooth brand communications among themselves due to less organizational rules and regulations. The hierarchy of a large company is also a barrier to effective internal brand communication. It has often been observed that by the time a brand message reaches the lower levels of a company, it may have changed to a completely different message. Although Axel Technologies is a small company where communication and branding is done solely by the company's CEO, it should keep in mind that every single employee represents the organization and should therefore understand its corporate brand identity accurately (de Chernatony, 2009).

1.4.1. *Managerial Implications*

In terms of managerial implications, the important message for small- and medium-sized companies is to rapidly develop their reputation on the market. This can be achieved by focusing on the development of strong personal connections and long-term business relationships. Through these, eventually, the company will gain a certain value in the network and a strong brand will be created. Through positive word of mouth, the company will maintain its reputation and corporate brand value. As regards developing personal connections, one of the best ways to strengthen a network connection and the company's portfolio is to hire people who already have established connections and can demonstrate experience and reputation in the specific market. When being presented by well-connected personnel, small companies like Axel Technologies can easily extend or increase their customer portfolio. Moreover, headhunting will also inspire existing employees to compete internally and perform better than their colleagues, in order to achieve organizational goals and build a sustainable identity within the organization. Consequently, healthy employee branding should also be practiced throughout the company (for more insights on employee branding, see Chapter 4).

Moreover, since there is no specific and straightforward conceptual framework on how to improve branding strategies in industrial businesses, we suggest that the development of mutual trust and strong relationships are crucial factors. These factors will further influence corporate brand identity and reputation and are therefore important elements of industrial branding.

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Appendix: Interview Questions — Axel Technologies

1. Do you practice B2B branding with you clients/buyers?
2. Which activities do you perform in order to maintain strong corporate branding?
3. Are you aware that there are two aspects of corporate branding benefits: "functional" and "emotional qualities"? If so, which one do you use when developing your branding? And why?
4. Do you focus your branding activities on the basis of your services or on the basis of your company name?
5. How does your company perceive brand value in a B2B context?
6. How do you think your clients perceive your brand?
7. Do you only brand yourself to clients (i.e., externally) or do you also brand yourself to your employees (i.e., internally)?
8. What are your unique value propositions?
9. Could you share a brand-value-related story that shows the strengths of your company's corporate brand?
10. Finally, could you give us some suggestions on how to improve the brand value in a B2B context?